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by

N. SCARLYN WILSON, M.A.

University of Cambridge Lecturer  
for University Extension

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## PREFACE

It is hardly necessary to say that this book does not pretend to give a complete history of European drama. For one thing no one can hope to know all about so vast a theme. For another, if such a person existed, he would find the task of cramming the genie into the brass bottle child's play in comparison with the labour of compressing the colossal subject of European drama into a single volume.

Still, Professor Dover Wilson has justified the title of his *Essential Shakespeare* in under 150 pages, while Mr. J. W. Marriott, using no more than double that modest allowance, has conveyed in his *Modern Drama* an enormous amount of highly readable information. Their example has encouraged me to embark on a book dealing with the outstanding movements in the development of the drama in Europe and I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to both of them.

Limitations of space have prevented me, not only from quoting extracts from plays to illustrate certain points, but also from mentioning in the text the various authorities I have consulted. I have had, therefore, to content myself with adding a short bibliography of some of the works of which I have most frequently made use. Any-one wishing to learn more of the subject than he can hope to glean from this book cannot do better than

read them. He will find them as helpful and stimulating as I have.

The editions of the many plays discussed or touched upon are not included in the bibliography, but I trust that the reader will give me credit for having read, either in the original or in translation, all the plays on which I have found space to remark. It was inevitable, if this book were not to degenerate into a mere catalogue of names and titles, that I should generalise and concentrate on the salient characteristics of the various playwrights. Everyone has his own tastes and prejudices—I plead guilty to an irrational but overpowering dislike of a certain type of Irish peasant drama—but I have done my best to preserve an open mind.

Gratiano, we are told, spoke “an infinite deal of nothing,” his reasons being as two grains of wheat in two bushels of chaff. I hope this book will be found to contain at least one grain of wheat. Anyway it is a short one, so the amount of chaff must, at the worst, be limited.

## CHAPTER I

### THE MEDIEVAL DRAMA

THE love of acting knows no barriers of time or race. It is common to children and primitive peoples. It has survived the sophisticating process of civilisation. Psychologists, no doubt, can account for it by "words of learned length and thund'ring sound", but no such explanation is really necessary. To act is a natural impulse, only needing something to give it an outlet. Religion provided it.

Early drama was, in every country, primarily religious in origin. The very name of tragedy signifies the "goat song," sung by the dancing chorus at the sacrifice of the sacred animal on the altar of Dionysus, whilst comedy takes its name from the merry chant of the revellers during the same festival. The Indian drama originated in a combination of song and dance at religious ceremonies and the primitive Chinese drama was not dissimilar, though its purpose was rather moral than purely religious.

Neither classical nor Asiatic drama, however, falls within the scope of this book: nor is there space to consider the possibility of relics of Roman comedy having been preserved in medieval times by successive generations of *jongleurs* and acrobats. In any case, it is true to say that there was virtually no regular drama in Europe between the fall of the Roman Empire and the period of the mystery plays.

It is a far cry from the works of Sophocles to those of Shakespeare, but there is a tenuous connecting thread. Paganism gave way to Christianity and the forms of



drama underwent as great a change as religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the drama continued to draw its inspiration from religion, and, for a while, even more fully than in classical times.

Before the invention of printing there were few people who possessed a Bible and not many more capable of reading one in the Latin version. The Church, anxious to drive home Scriptural precept, therefore readily welcomed the idea of instructing an uneducated flock by portraying Biblical stories as well as by reading them. There was nothing revolutionary in the idea. The mass itself is a symbolic representation of outstanding events in the life of Christ, but for the purpose of illustrating Bible stories something more direct was needed.

By the 9th century additional texts to the ecclesiastical music had been supplied and these frequently assumed a dialogue and, consequently, a dramatic form. The next step followed inevitably. These texts were detached from the regular service and presented separately or, rather, with an appropriate dramatic ritual. Then came the slow development of dialogue and action into miniature Latin plays. This was followed, not long after, by the introduction of the Vernacular into the midst of the Latin verse and, finally, by the disappearance of the Latin element altogether.

There are many people to-day who object, on principle, to the performance of religious plays in Churches. The mediæval mind was troubled by no such scruples. The Church then was not only a place of worship: it was a school, a centre of art, a meeting-place and, on occasion, a place of amusement. The religion of the day was a broad one. It was simple and mystical, but it did not frown on laughter. The real bishop was aped by the boy bishop with his crowd of noisy attendants. In France, on St. Stephen's day, young clerks brought an ass into church in memory of the flight into Egypt and delivered burlesque sermons, and that, originally at least,

without irreverent intent. No one, therefore, saw anything amiss in the performance of these primitive plays, acted in the churches by the monks, priests and choir-boys attached to them.

Most of these early works took as their theme the events associated with Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. They showed little power of dramatic construction and their very nature tended to make them stereotyped in matter and diction. Development only came with the drama's complete break away from the Church services of which it had once formed a part.

The use of the Vernacular was the first step towards secularisation. Plays were rendered attractive thereby to a wider audience and, in the absence of other forms of amusement, people flocked to see them. Although few medieval churches were encumbered with pews of any kind, accommodation became quickly inadequate and the obvious solution was to transfer the performance outside the building to the town square or the village green.

This removal led quickly to a change in the character of the plays themselves. Even when the church had been the theatre the comic element had not been altogether lacking. Faith, in medieval times, though tinged, perhaps, with superstition, was both simple and fervent. Moreover, it was intensely personal. The fact that the Universe was ruled by a Power, which loved people sufficiently to assume mortality and suffer death for their redemption, struck each individual as a piece of lasting good news, affecting him personally. It was a real significant event, inducing cheerfulness, and cheerfulness naturally found expression in laughter. The medieval craftsman showed his joy at the discomfiture of the powers of evil by carving grotesque gargoyles. But he was just as ready to do so by laughing consumedly when he saw the devil pilloried in the drama instead of in stone.

This personal attitude towards the Gospel story

influenced the medieval playwright as well as the spectator. In a Nativity play the shepherds were not remote outlandish folk, but closely identified in the author's mind with himself and his friends. What more natural, therefore, than that they should use the speech that he heard about him? Before the appearance of the angel the shepherds had no thought in their heads but their everyday concerns: so the playwright made them talk of the crops or the weather, grumble about the taxes and jest among themselves exactly as his own compatriots did. Thus, quite early in dramatic history, comic relief and realistic observation of contemporary life find their beginning.

The religious element was still predominant, but the Church found much to deplore in the slowly developing drama. Clergy ceased to write plays or to take part in them. The result was not to check the growth of the drama but to throw it into other hands. The town guilds took over the representation of the plays and carried on the custom until the 16th century.

Miracle and Mystery plays, the two outstanding forms of medieval drama, reached maturity in the 14th century. Works written in France by Jean Bodel and Rutebeuf date from a hundred years before, but it was only after the decree of the Council of Vienne in 1311, which established Corpus Christi day, as a great festival of the Church, that mystery plays multiplied and attained such popularity that records of performances can be traced in more than 125 towns and villages in this country.

Previous dramas had necessarily been limited in scope and subject. But there was no particular Biblical story associated with the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. Consequently, plays, hitherto disconnected, became blended together into more or less formal cycles and revealed to an eager crowd the whole history of the world from the creation of Adam to the resurrection of Christ.

Occasionally simultaneous performances were given at several points so as to allow as many people as possible to see the plays. The usual practice, however, was to repeat each portion in different parts or "stations" of the town. The stage was generally a movable six-wheeled scaffold, drawn by horses and consisting of an upper platform, on which the performance took place, and a lower curtained room where the actors dressed.

There was no attempt at accuracy of costume. Dresses were splendid, not appropriate. There were certain conventions. God was represented in a white coat, the actor having his face gilded (until the injurious effects of this were found out) and Hell was either a dragon's mouth or a Devil's head, though in Germany it was symbolised by a barrel placed at the foot of a ladder marking the ascent to Heaven.

There was no idea of creating for the spectator the illusion of reality. In Germany the actor announced what character he represented and, having played his part in the action, retired to the particular spot allotted to him until the time came for him to speak again. In Roman times the actor had the humble status of a slave and missed a cue at his peril. In medieval days, when the plays were long and the cast large, a prompter was a necessary figure and no attempt was made to conceal him. Early pictures show him in full view, pointing with a stick at the player whose turn it was to speak next.

In the later period of the Roman theatre women took the stage occasionally in comedies, but their appearances in the Middle Ages seem to have been rare: a girl played the part of St. Catherine in a mystery at Metz in 1468, but references to similar performances elsewhere are very scarce.

The players were not strictly professionals, though they were generally paid for the actual performances. The money was raised by an annual rate, varying in England from 1d. to 4d., and levied on each member of the guild

or corporation concerned. Small part actors received 4d., whilst leading players might get as much as 4/-, not an inconsiderable sum in an age when ale cost 2d. a gallon. There were in addition expenses for dresses and for food and drink during rehearsals, so that altogether, despite the meagreness of scenery and properties, production was a costly business.

This, coupled with the length of the plays, made it impossible for any one body to be solely responsible for an entire cycle. Most of the plays were enormously long. The dramatisation of the Acts of the Apostles by the brothers Gréban ran to 62,000 lines and, played only on Sundays starting at 3 or 4 a.m., occupied the stage for seven months and required several hundred players.

Consequently, the normal custom was for each guild or corporation to take one episode from the cycle. Before the age of the mystery plays a trade guild might present a stained-glass window or a statue in honour of its patron saint. Now it presented instead the story of the saint's life in action, an arrangement far more acceptable to the members and the public, and, in short, to everyone, with the possible exception of the disappointed local glazier or sculptor!

Thus, by collaboration, these unwieldy works were successfully staged. In 1415, for instance, when the famous York cycle, compiled about 1350, was performed, it was divided into 48 sections and no fewer than 81 different trade guilds took part in it. The same arrangement held good with the Towneley or Wakefield cycle and with those of Chester and Coventry.

No one version was invariably used. If funds or players were lacking, the cycle was shortened. If, on the other hand, circumstances permitted, the cycle might be extended and the medieval dramatist came into his own. He did not scruple in that case to invent people. Thus we have Cain's servant or the Beadle in Pilate's court, who rebukes the governor for fondling his wife in

public, thereby supplying comic relief. Sometimes these interpolations give sketches of contemporary life, frequently of a humorous or satirical kind. A play written by the early Spanish dramatist Encina, for example, depicts carnival scenes and a brawl between shepherds and the students of Salamanca, whilst part of Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* contains lively tavern episodes, at the close of which thieves, who have stolen a treasure entrusted to the care of the Saint, decide to return it when he appears to them.

The differences between the various kinds of plays were not clearly defined. Nominally, mysteries dealt only with Biblical events, whilst miracle plays were concerned with incidents derived from legends of the saints of the church and more particularly of Our Lady. But the two were often indistinguishable. All were written in verse and chaotically constructed. Comedy and tragedy were inextricably entangled and realism went side by side with the naïve or the grotesque.

Both were distinct from the morality plays which appeared rather more than a century after the establishment of the mystery as a definite form. The morality plays were very much longer than the various component parts of a mystery cycle, and were frequently divided into acts and scenes. They were intended, also, for a slightly different audience, since many were clearly written for performance by professional actors in the halls of great houses. It is in the moralities, too, that indications of individual authorship first appear.

A yet more fundamental difference is the fact that the personages of a morality play are in the main allegorical. Oddly enough this did not greatly hinder the growth of characterisation. Biblical figures, being well defined beforehand, gave the playwright little scope, but he was able in the presentation of some personified virtue or vice to introduce a good many realistic traits from contemporary life.

To the modern reader morality plays are inconceivably dreary. It is difficult to be interested when Everyman, approached by Death, is deserted by Fellowship, Kindred and Goods and only followed beyond the grave by Good Deeds. To us the Book of Job is infinitely better drama. But there is recompense for much tedium and prolixity in the genuine comedy to be found in some of the rascals and in the antics of the "Vice," who became a recognised feature of the morality play and, by his roguery and sense of fun, a stock figure, to whom the Elizabethan clown was to owe much.

A more interesting development was that of the interlude.

Its treatment was at first as didactic as that of the morality. But it came presently to be a play with a much more marked element of comedy. It was generally a good deal shorter and, since it required no stage accessories and few players, was well within the compass of a company of strolling actors. Some interludes were written specifically for performance in the halls of the great houses, notably one composed by Thomas Medwall, chaplain to Cardinal Morton, which comprised two parts and was intended to be represented in the intervals between three bouts of drinking. In this, though allegory and moralising are still present, the tone is more trivial and the play deals with fragments instead of with the whole of man's life.

The same applies to the work of Rastell, John Heywood and other writers of interludes. In their plays and in many that followed we find the introduction of purely secular characteristics. The drama, in short, was taking a highly significant step forward. It was striking out a line entirely independent of moral instruction or religious precept towards romantic comedy and realistic farce.

The English interlude found a parallel in the French farce. Originally, as the derivation of the word suggests, a short play inserted by way of contrast into a more

serious performance, the farce eventually shook itself free and emerged as a separate entity. It was wholly secular, often, in fact, exceedingly coarse, but it contained real comedy and a considerable degree of humorous characterisation.

One of the best known is the *Farce of the Tub*. In this a henpecked husband is given by his wife a list of the duties he has to perform and forbidden either to shirk or to exceed his responsibilities. All goes well until the shrew falls into a wash-tub and is unable to get out. She shrieks to her husband to come and extricate her, but he anticipating Shylock, merely looks at his schedule and answers: 'I cannot find it: 'tis not in the bond.'

Even more famous is the anonymous *Maitre Pathelin*. Here an impoverished and rascally lawyer, having duped a draper, undertakes to defend a peasant whom the same tradesman has accused of killing a sheep. Realising the stupidity of his client, Pathelin bids him give no other answer than a bleat to the questions put to him. The plaintiff is so overcome with rage on finding himself face to face with the lawyer and the shepherd, both of whom have cheated him, that he becomes hopelessly confused and is quite unable to give a coherent account of his grievances. The bleating utterances of the shepherd complete the judge's exasperation and he impatiently dismisses the case. But when the artful Pathelin approaches his acquitted client for his fee, he receives only a baffling bleating by way of reply. This is true farcical comedy, based on the eternally popular theme of the trickster being hoist with his own petard.

The Reformation took place during the period of the interlude, but it was not invariably hostile to the drama. In Germany, for instance, the cause of the theatre was furthered by it. Luther condemned Passion plays as being too sentimental, but he thought that drama was represented in the Old Testament, the book of Judith being originally a tragedy and that of Tobit a comedy.



Moreover, in his opinion drama, seriously treated, was a good medium of propaganda. Thus Biblical drama flourished.

Nuremberg in particular was a centre of dramatic activity. Here the cobbler Hans Sachs, untroubled by religious controversy, placidly wrote 200 plays in facile verse, using the Bible and Italian novels as his source with equal readiness. In his farces one figure, the cheating husband or the fickle wife, was always satirically caricatured. In his religious plays he was simple and kindly. Adam instructs his children to take their caps off politely to the Good God and Cain is no more than a naughty boy. His plays, in default of dramatic force, have the charm inherent in sincere, primitive work.

Other and abler dramatists succeeded the genial cobbler, but before the German theatre could really profit by the visit of a company of English actors, who showed them something better than interludes or imitations of the classics, the Thirty Years' War broke out and amid the enduring misery of that troubled time the German theatre suffered a prolonged eclipse.

In France it was a very different story. The authorities viewed the spread of the Reformation with alarm. Religious propaganda in pamphlets or from the pulpit might be countered. But the mystery plays drew a large audience to whom the new ideas could be presented in a dangerously attractive form. Such, at least, was the official view and in 1548 the 'Parlement' of Paris was prevailed upon to ban the performance of religious plays. This step was never wholly effective. Mystery plays continued to be acted up and down the country, often under different names, until well on in the 17th century. Nominally, however, the ban held good until the production of Corneille's *Polyeucte* in 1643.

This decree was a severe blow to the company known as the *Confrérie de la Passion*. Profiting by a lucid moment of the mad king Charles VI, they had been

granted by him, as far back as 1402, the sole right to perform such plays in the capital.

At their theatre, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the system of production known as the *décor simultané* was in use. The scene in mystery plays changed very frequently. So, by this method, whilst the stage itself remained unlocalised the numerous changes of scene were indicated by a back-cloth or a series of wooden frames divided into as many sections as there were changes of scene, each section or 'mansion' representing in summary fashion one or other of the settings. Thus 30 or 40 'mansions' might be ranged alongside one another, depicting localities as far apart as Jerusalem, Rome, Herod's palace, Heaven or Hell. It was a guileless device, but the public accepted the convention just as a modern audience is ready to believe that a room has only three walls.

This method of the 'standing scene' was practised widely on the Continent. It was used sometimes in England, though, when the play was given on a movable platform, only one or two 'mansions' could be put together owing to the restriction of space. The difficulty was obviated by that particular scaffold being pulled to another 'station' to re-enact the same scenes, whilst another took its place.

The great drawback to the method was that in the circumscribed area of an indoor stage it was not possible to represent on a "standing scene" more than five or six of the 30 or 40 different settings required. For this reason, when the Elizabethan theatres came to be built, the attempt to represent all the scenes at once was abandoned in favour of something more vague and simple, except in the case of houses belonging to the boy companies, where the changes of scene were generally few enough to allow the old system to be maintained.

The *Confrérie de la Passion* was not the only body of actors to suffer in France. The Italian players introduced by Catherine de Medici were held captive for a time by the

Huguenots. But they were ransomed and brought to Paris where they gave their celebrated improvisations. Their pieces were rarely written in full. Each actor knew the outline of the plot and invented lines and by-play as he went along, thereby giving to the performance an astounding air of spontaneity and naturalness. Constant association with each other rendered this easier. Their task was further facilitated by the fact that they played the parts of stock figures familiar to them, the pedant, the boastful captain, the simpleton and the rogue.

Such characters were not new. Some of them existed in the works of classical authors. But the Italians made them known. They bulk large in the comedy of the Latin races. They are in a sense immortal. Fundamentally the same, they become in the hands of a genius perennially new. The characters of Molière, Lope de Vega, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson are distinguished from one another by differences of race or individual genius. But many of the great comic characters are basically alike and the part played by the Italian improvisers in popularising types, destined to develop in other hands into great creations, is frequently overlooked.

By the end of the third quarter of the 16th century the drama, then, had made considerable headway. There were as yet no masterpieces. Political events delayed their appearance in Germany. In France the theatre of the 17th century grew, not from the popular medieval theatre, but from the influence of the classics and polite society. There was, therefore, necessarily an interval before it could emerge.

But in England it was otherwise. The old mystery and morality plays had aroused and sustained an interest in the theatre. The comic spirit had found expression. There was a considerable amount of satirical and realistic writing in the interludes. The drama was a lively spectacle with the words, on the whole, rather an explanation of action than an expression of ideas. The

psychological interest was the least fully developed. Construction was chaotic and the differences between the various kinds of play even yet not wholly established nor firmly maintained. But there was, on the other hand, immense verve and vitality : above all a willingness to represent anything and everything on the stage. Discipline, taste, the sense of form were lessons slowly taught by the diffusion of Renaissance scholarship. The old popular spirit, however, was too strong to be stifled. It was from the surging vigour of the old drama, influenced but not shackled by classical learning, that there sprang the great efflorescence of Elizabethan genius culminating in the plays of Shakespeare.

## CHAPTER II

### PRE-SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

At the date of Queen Elizabeth's accession drama was a highly popular form of amusement. It was still primitive. But it was developing and the number of actors, both professional and amateur, rapidly increased.

Singers, acrobats and dancers had existed all through the Middle Ages and many of them began to include interludes in their performances. It was a vague term, covering almost as many types of play as the word "comedy," an expression not much used in England, incidentally, until the influence of the Classics had made itself felt. Some of these interludes were gaily satirical sketches, others pieces of thinly disguised political or religious propaganda, whilst a few more were in the nature of romantic comedies. But the majority rested on a firm basis of knockabout farce and were therefore well suited to small companies of strolling players, who could add dancing and tumbling to the entertainment.

At the same time the Italian Renaissance found an echo in England. The re-discovery of the classics lent a new interest to the drama, and soon attempts were made to revive the comedies of Plautus and to produce English plays on the same model.

Dignified bodies such as the Corporations, the Inns of Court and the Universities had stuck, in the main, to serious works—the York Cycle was performed as late as 1579. But the ability to act a part was almost as fully a recognised feature of a gentleman's education as the capacity to pen a sonnet or to read a song at sight: so

the Universities readily turned their attention to acting Latin plays both in the original and in English adaptations.

But they unbent on occasion and played light-hearted interludes.

The professionals, not to be outdone, recognised the new importance of the Classics and sometimes acted Plautian comedies to which they might add a bewildering hotch-potch of garbled history, country legend, or Greek mythology, all in a form calculated to appeal to an unsophisticated audience. It was from this medley of old and new, of classical and popular, that the Elizabethan drama drew its richness and variety.

Another dramatic form found favour, though among a narrower circle. The respect for the Classics had not destroyed the medieval love of costly pageantry. The Court, in particular, encouraged shows involving music, dancing, rich costume and such mechanical and scenic devices as were available. A thread of allegory or classical mythology generally served to hold the whole loosely-knit fabric together, and these "masques" were given frequently both at Court and in the so-called "private" theatres, by the children's companies which constituted, as the player in Hamlet laments, a notable thorn in the flesh of the adult actors.

There were at this date no regular theatres. In London, inn-yards served in their stead. A trestle stage could easily be set up at one end and the open space before it, together with the surrounding galleries, provided accommodation for the spectators. Landlords welcomed the players as a means of attracting thirsty onlookers and certain inns, the Bell, the Bull, the Saracen's Head at Islington and the Boar's Head at Whitechapel became such constant resorts of the players that they almost lost their original function.

The next step was the erection of permanent theatres with funds provided by backers, who scented profit in the growing popularity of the drama. The Puritans disliked

the drama just as they discouraged most forms of art except music and, ironically enough, it was their disapproval that hastened the building of the theatres. With the innyards denied them by the City Fathers, the players had to seek a home beyond their jurisdiction and, as there were no suitable places of the old pattern outside, they were under the necessity of putting up special buildings. Thus *The Theatre* came into existence on a site near Shoreditch in 1576. This continued to be used for 22 years when its timbers served for the fabric of *The Globe*. Meanwhile others had sprung up. *The Curtain* in Shoreditch: *The Rose* on the south bank of the Thames: *The Swan* at Southwark. The earliest "private" theatre was *The Blackfriars*, built in 1576 for the Children of the Chapel Royal. The 'private' theatres were open to the public, but they differed from the rest in being roofed in, whilst the prices were higher and the performances were given by artificial light.

The status of the players themselves improved with the buildings that housed them. Still vagabonds theoretically, they were assuming importance. To escape the displeasure of the law most of them secured the patronage of a great noble and called themselves his "servants". Thus there came into being the King's men, the Lord Admiral's men, the Earl of Pembroke's men and so on, an arrangement that survived until the 18th century.

Even before the building of the theatres secular drama had firmly established itself. The interludes had developed sufficiently to provide matter for a full length play, and real comedy, tragedy and historical drama appeared as complete and recognisable forms. They were fustian stuff, but one or two of them hold a place in theatrical history as forerunners of a great line. As such they are worth a glance.

Bishop Bale was the author of several moralities. But in *King John* he produced something new. This play

had much in common with the earlier tradition, since many of the characters were personified abstractions. But some were not and the moral, though duly emphasised, was brought out by an event in secular, not religious history. It is not good drama: it is not even good history. King John's defiance of the Pope is portrayed as an action meritorious enough to cover all his faults. Nevertheless, the real historical figures moving among the abstractions make the play important. The chief character is not kingship, but an individual king.

It is dull reading and there is more real entertainment in *Ralph Roister Doister*. This comedy is a direct descendant of the interlude, which derived in turn from the realistic interpolations in the mysteries. But the author, Nicholas Udall, Headmaster of Eton from 1534 to 1541 (in which year he was dismissed on a charge of conniving at a theft of plate from the College Chapel!) was a scholar, and, consequently, his play was divided into five acts on the Latin model.

The plot, however, shows no trace of classical austerity. In lively unambitious verse it unfolds a fairly elaborate story. Matthew Merrygreek consents, for a joke, to help the boastful Ralph to woo Dame Custance, a widow betrothed to Gawin Goodluck, a London merchant. She scornfully refuses his presents and he then hires a scrivener to write her a letter which she angrily returns. The artful Merrygreek reads the letter aloud to Ralph in such a manner that it sounds rude, thereby forestalling Peter Quince's rendering of the Prologue to the 'most lamentable comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe.'

Ralph, in a rage, abuses the scrivener who explains the misunderstanding and Merrygreek next urges his friend to subject the widow by force. Ralph is a notorious coward, of the type familiar in Latin comedy and in the mysteries, and his expedition is duly routed by Dame Custance and her women. Goodluck for a moment doubts the widow's fidelity, but all is explained and the



play, which ends with a song, leaves Ralph with his self-esteem wholly unimpaired.

It is a rough and ready piece, but much of the fun depends on character and not merely on incident. Merrygreek resembles the valet of Italian comedy, whilst Ralph himself is an ancestor of Parolles and Bobadil. The purely knockabout element is giving way to something better.

The tragedy of *Gorboduc*, printed in 1561, though much duller, is a landmark. The authors Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, produced, for the first time in England, a serious drama which, while the moral was duly stressed, was not primarily didactic in its purpose. Moreover, also for the first time, we have an English five-act tragedy in blank verse, the form that the Elizabethans were to make their own.

The classical dramatist most imitated by Renaissance authors was the Roman Seneca. But *Gorboduc* was nearer to the Greek. The unities of time and place were preserved and deeds of violence were described by messengers instead of being represented on the stage, an arrangement which would not have found favour with audiences a decade later. As a concession to the popular love of stirring action, however, the messenger's speeches were supplemented by dumb-show interludes and this device, used by Shakespeare as a prelude to the play presented by Hamlet to snare Claudius, was fairly widely adopted.

*Gorboduc* has nothing of the freedom of later Elizabethan drama. It is stilted and artificially symmetrical. King Gorboduc has two sons Ferrex and Porrex, each of whom is flanked by a wise counsellor and a sycophant. Like Lear, the king has divided his realm between his children and each, misled by his advisers, mistrusts the other's intentions and tries to seize his brother's share. Ferrex is killed and the survivor, summoned to court, is slain by his mother who idolised her elder son. Outraged by this

crime, the people kill their rulers. Nobles repress the revolt. One of them sees an opportunity to mount the throne and the play ends with the prospect of a long period of disorder.

This tragedy is a work of the intellect not of the imagination. It has no colour, no life. There is little action and a quantity of long-winded moralising. It would empty any theatre were it staged to-day. For all that, it is significant. The play attempted to give to the careless English drama a real literary quality. Tragedy, fortunately, was not destined to develop along the lines of the model chosen by Norton and Sackville. But the Elizabethans were to use the same metre and the conscientious versification of *Gorboduc* led to 'Marlowe's mighty line' and the rich perfection of Shakespeare.

The *Globe* theatre was built in 1598. Ten years before that, plays had been produced that were not only good literature, but, occasionally, good drama. The playwrights who did most to bring about this change were the group of men known as the University Wits. The majority reflected little credit on their respective seats of learning. They led riotous lives and died young. None of them was much senior to Shakespeare, but all wrote or began to write before him and each contributed something to the betterment of the drama.

John Lyly (1554 ?-1606 ?) was the least disreputable. His novel *Euphues* earned him fame at once. Its balanced, precious sentences set the fashion for polite speech for a decade and he used prose of the same type in his plays. The style of *Love's Labour's Lost* owes much to it. All of Lyly's eight dramatic works were written for Court performance by the 'children of the Chapel Royal' or the choristers of St. Paul's.

He was not interested in human character or emotion. His purpose was to supply court entertainment of an intellectual kind with a certain topical point. His usual method was to select a classical myth, provide it with a

love story, if it lacked one, then insert a courtly artificial or pastoral note and colour the whole with topical satire.

The foregoing sentence reads like an extract from a cookery book. It does so designedly, for Lyly's plays, often allegorical in the manner of Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, give the impression of being a concoction of dispassionately chosen ingredients.

The allegory is often complex. In *Endymion*, for instance, Cynthia, the Lady of the Moon, is not only Chastity but the Queen, and her platonic love for Endymion a discreet reflection of Elizabeth's relations with Leicester. Promoting or hindering the central love affair are a motley throng of deities, nymphs and decidedly English fairies, together with pages and waiting women, whose quick repartee is a foil to the courtly wit of the chief characters, whilst their pranks are a refined substitute for the buffooneries of the 'Vice' in the popular mysteries.

Lyly could and did write exquisite lyric verse—'Cupid and my Campaspe played at cards for kisses. Cupid paid'—but the merit of his plays lies in the prose dialogue. He lifted comedy above the level of crude farce by giving it an intellectual quality and language. His dialogue is polished, tinged with faintly melancholy satire, and pallidly fanciful. That was his real gift to the drama and many playwrights, from Congreve to Coward, are among his lineal descendants.

The output of George Peele (1558 ?–1597 ?) was more varied. His *Arraignment of Paris*, the familiar story of the bestowal of the golden apple on Venus, is a court masque of the classico-allegorical type favoured by Lyly. But in preference to prose Peele chose a mixture of rhymed and blank verse. An historical play, *Edward I*, was written in the same medium. It has little dramatic merit. Nor has *The Battle of Alcazar*, ranting robustious stuff, which, no doubt, captured the anti-Spanish feeling of the moment. *David and Bethsabe* is a better bit of work.

In theme it might be a miracle play, but it is treated as a chronicle in the Shakespearean manner, Absalom's revolt being represented as Heaven's punishment for David's treachery to Uriah. There is no characterisation, but the logic of events is clearly shown and the verse is often charming.

Peele, in fact, was more of a poet than a dramatist and certainly a better hand at comedy than he was at tragedy. For this reason, easily his most attractive work, to modern tastes, is *The Old Wives Tale*, a quaint, formless, inconsequent piece of writing which probably gave Milton the idea of *Comus*.

In it, three travellers, Antic, Frolic and Fantastic, come to the house of the Old Wife who begins to tell a tale. Whereupon the whole thing shifts to dreamland and the characters of the narrative come in and act the story themselves, somewhat after the manner of the beginning of *The Taming of the Shrew*. It is a weird, incoherent tale of a lady taken captive by a wicked enchanter, much of the play being a mixture of folk comedy and a parody of ranting Senecan drama.

The important point is that the play constitutes a link between the old and the new. The Miracle and Morality plays had virtually vanished. But much of them remained: their medley of persons from all ranks of life, their mixture of the terrible, the ludicrous and the superhuman, their epic structure. All this is to be found in Peele's rambling play and it was this type and not the stark Greek model which the great Elizabethans were to follow. There was certainly classical influence present. But the popular element predominated. Shakespeare's plays, in fact, fly in the face of the classical canon. It was for this reason that Voltaire, who actually appreciated him much more than the majority of his countrymen, termed him a 'barbarian.'

Robert Greene, the third of the group, came of a respectable Norwich family and took his degree at

Cambridge in 1578. Having thus gained some knowledge at the University, he proceeded to acquire bad habits on the Continent. Returning to London, he frequented the worst of company and took as his mistress the sister of a notorious criminal named Cutting Ball. This worthy, knowing his chronic impecuniosity, provided him with a bodyguard of ruffians to protect him from the bailiffs when he walked abroad.

By this girl the playwright had a natural son whom he called, ironically, Fortunatus Greene. His lawful wife was discarded as soon as he had run through her marriage portion. But he seems, nevertheless, to have regarded her as the ideal of womanhood, for it is generally considered that the Margaret of his best play is, in some sort, a portrait of her.

In 1592 he took too much pickled herring and Rhenish wine at a banquet and collapsed (not unnaturally) in the street on his way home. He was picked up in a dying condition and in one of his last letters he begged his wife to reimburse the charitable shoemaker who had befriended him.

Greene wrote various prose romances and numerous pamphlets, the best known of which is an exposure of the different kinds of frauds and swindles most commonly practised on the unwary. His play *James IV* is from the dramatic point of view, decidedly poor. It had nothing of the historical play except the title, being the weirdest kind of fairy tale, full of irrelevant incidents and framed by a strange induction, which introduces an old hermit whose magical powers are as remarkable as his Scottish dialect.

Magic, both black and white, made a great appeal to the audiences of the day, and it figures largely in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. In its essentials the plot is simple. Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, sent to woo a gamekeeper's daughter on behalf of his master, the Prince of Wales, falls honourably in love with her himself. By means

of the magical arts of the Friar, who is a parody of the great 13th century scientist, Roger Bacon, the Prince learns of the turn events are taking. He is furious with the Earl, but his better feelings triumph and the play ends with the joint betrothal of Lacy to Margaret and of the Prince to Elinor of Castille.

Tacked on to this is a mass of irrelevancies, characteristic of all these pioneer plays. There is a conjuring contest between the Friar and a German rival: a duel between two squires, both in love with Margaret, and a fatal quarrel between the sons who witness their parents' dispute in Friar Bacon's magic glass: finally there is the episode of the brazen head which speaks magical words and falls in fragments, before the friar can be roused from slumber to hear them.

The piece is a bewildering medley. It has, nevertheless, a certain charm. Greene, unlike his contemporaries, never inserted songs in his plays, but he could write good verse. The less exalted passages were in prose, a practice followed by Shakespeare, and the whole play gives, for the first time, a good picture of the English countryside. Greene made some attempt at characterisation and contributed, more than any other of the University Wits, to found romantic comedy. But between the sporadic merits of *Friar Bacon* and the sustained excellence of *Twelfth Night* there is a deep gulf fixed. In fact, anyone who has doubts of Shakespeare's qualities would do well to compare his work with the best of the comedies of his immediate predecessors. The difference of achievement is almost incredibly great.

Thomas Kyd (1558-1594), the son of a London scrivener, was educated at Merchant Taylor's School and despite his inclusion in the group, did not, in all probability, enter either of the Universities. For a time he shared a lodging with Marlowe and, following the latter's death, Kyd was arrested on a charge of

atheism. The accusation was based on certain documents found in his possession, which he maintained belonged to Marlowe. He was most likely lying. In any case his disavowal did him no good, for he was imprisoned and tortured.

His life, then, was brief and troubled. But he contrived to write in *The Spanish Tragedy* the most popular play of a decade. In the classical drama of blood or revenge horrors were reported, not represented. But the Elizabethans of that period demanded bloodshed and rant, and Kyd supplied them in full measure. The play was produced in the year that witnessed the Spanish Armada and the assassination of the Duke of Guise, and an audience familiar with such stirring events in contemporary history relished striking incident and adventure, particularly when they were accompanied by bombastic speeches and colourful verse.

Kyd provided them with a horrific plot. The ghost of Don Andrea asks Revenge to punish Balthasar who had slain him in battle and been taken captive by the dead man's friend, Horatio. Revenge consents and appears at intervals with the ghost to comment on the progress of his scheme. These observations are a relic of the old Greek chorus, whilst the passages of philosophy and introspection are Senecan. There the classical influence ends. The play itself is an accumulation of bloodthirsty episodes.

The captive Balthasar falls in love with Bel-imperia, the dead Andrea's betrothed, who naturally detests him. Her brother Lorenzo, who hates Horatio, conspires with Balthasar to kill him. The deed is duly carried out by two of Lorenzo's servants, both of whom are subsequently murdered to ensure secrecy. One of them, however, finds means to reveal his master's guilt to Horatio's father, Hieronimo.

His wife kills herself for grief and Hieronimo goes

mad. But in his lucid moments he plans revenge and enlists the aid of Bel-imperia. They compass their revenge by a play in which Balthasar and Lorenzo are persuaded to act with them. The spectators, fancying that they are witnessing a scene of make-believe, do not stir when Hieronimo kills Lorenzo and his accomplice despatches Balthasar. Unfortunately, in the stress of her horror, Bel-imperia goes beyond her part and slays herself. Thereupon Hieronimo reveals the truth to the horror stricken court, bites out his tongue (the audience must have loved that bit!) and kills himself.

The events of this blood-curdling story hang together by a kind of crazy logic, if one can accept—which is now impossible—the exaggerated Spanish code of honour. Moreover, despite its absurdity, the piece influenced later dramatists. There was a certain splendour about some of the rhetorical passages. The idea of a ghost watching the slow approach of retribution was used in *Hamlet*. Even so, despite its significance as a dramatic milestone, the defects of the play over-top its merits. The bombast, intolerable to us, was popular at the time. But the total absence of psychological insight soon caused a play, rapturously received on its first production, to lose favour with discriminating playgoers. Within a few years tags from it were being bandied about the London streets as humorous catchwords. The practice was at once a tribute to its superficial appeal and a condemnation of its tawdriness.

Basically, *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* are both melodramas. But with Shakespeare characterisation is all important. With Kyd, on the other hand, the personages are mere puppets working out their destiny at the bidding of the author. Nor does this distinction take into account the difference in the quality of the language of the two plays. The forging of blank verse



into a perfect medium for dramatic expression was the work of Marlowe.

The son of a prosperous shoemaker, Christopher Marlowe was educated at King's School, Canterbury and at Cambridge. He came to London immediately after taking his master's degree and achieved instant renown with the first part of *Tamburlaine*. The second part, at least as regards its versification, is not inferior. Each line ends by a single syllable. In *Edward II* the double ending is freely used. *Dr. Faustus*, played by the celebrated actor Alleyn, is a compromise between the two. All these plays and two more, *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre of Paris* were written between 1587 and 1593.

In May of the latter year Marlowe was summoned before the Privy Council. In the same month he was stabbed to death by Ingram Friser in a Deptford tavern. The circumstances of both happenings are mysterious. Kyd, his fellow-lodger, was accused of atheism, and the assumption is that Marlowe was involved in the same trouble. The theme of *Faustus* might conceivably have led to a charge of atheism being preferred against him, though its ending is highly moral and the play was written four years before his death. Yet another theory is that he was a hanger on of Walsingham's secret police and paid the penalty for finding out too much.

Nor are the details of his death any more clear. A drunken brawl, a quarrel over a woman, a carefully planned attack—any of these may have led up to the tragedy. So little is certainly known that Miss Clemence Dane in her fine dramatic 'invention' has made Shakespeare his rival in the affections of Mary Fitton and the indirect instrument of his death. One thing is certain. Marlowe, in his short life, raised blank verse to a higher level than it had ever reached before.

In a brief prologue Marlowe tells his audience that he calls them away 'from jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits' to 'the stately tents of war' and *Tamburlaine* is rather a pageant of strife than a play. In the Middle Ages tragedy was invariably associated with princes, but *Tamburlaine*, though he mounts a throne, begins as a Scythian shepherd. The whole first part is a rising succession of victories with, as its only serious fault, the improbability of the captured princess falling in love with the ruthless tyrant. Yet the splendour of the rhythmic phrases dwarfs this defect. The play is not only a story of conquest but the expression of Marlowe's own dream of unattainable greatness, voiced by his megalomaniac hero.

'If all the pens that ever poets held  
Had fed the feeling of their master's thoughts,  
And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,  
Their minds and muses on admired themes :

. . . . .

If these had made one poem's period  
And all combined in human worthiness,  
Yet should there hover in their restless heads  
One thought, one grace, one wonder at the best,  
Which into words no virtue could digest.'

In the second part—and *dramatically* the play would be more effective if the two were compressed into one—*Tamburlaine* comes to his end. His queen is taken from him. He learns that kings in death are but as other men and dies, calling for a map to point out countries yet unconquered to his son.

*Dr. Faustus*, the theme of which is derived from a chap-book describing the original alchemist familiar to German legend, is very different. All Marlowe's plays show the importance attached by the Renaissance

to the individual, and each reveals further, some particular characteristic of the Movement. In *Tamburlaine* it is the love of temporal and material power, in *Edward II* boundless egotism, in *The Jew of Malta* the search for illimitable wealth. In *Faustus* it is the Renaissance craving for knowledge bringing with it spiritual power.

The interest of the plays depends almost entirely on the personality of the hero. In Shakespearean tragedy much of the dramatic force comes from the contemplation of the essential nobility of the central character. In Marlowe the personages are rather stupendous than actually noble. But the fundamental conception of a strong character battling towards success and falling unconquered is common to both dramatists and at the root of most 17th century tragedy. This, coupled with his mastery of blank verse, constitutes Marlowe's chief contribution to the drama.

*Tamburlaine* is brought low by remorseless and inevitable death, the Jew by mundane influences and Faust by the terms of his bargain with the Devil. The methods vary. But the eventual downfall is a constant factor and a potent source of that pity and terror deemed vital to real tragedy by the ancients.

The beginning and end of *Faustus* are magnificent. The middle part is far less successful, for the reason that the doctor, having secured his diabolical knowledge at such cost to himself, uses it for trivial ends, more suited to low comedy than to serious drama. Only in making love to Helen of Troy, whom he conjures up (Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?) does he use his powers in a way that can satisfy the imagination of the spectators. But the close has dignity and, when he has paid the penalty, the Chorus rounds off the play with the moral but memorable lines:

‘Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,  
And burnèd is Apollo’s laurel bough.’

In *Edward II* alone of Marlowe's plays is there a clash of personalities instead of the onward march to impressive destruction of one dominating figure. Mortimer, the ill-used queen and Edward himself are ranged effectively in opposition. The trouble is that Edward is the villain at the beginning and Mortimer at the end. There is an inevitable breaking of emotional unity in consequence, accentuated by the abruptness of the transition. Nevertheless though the play is not so poetical as the others, it is nearer to being a great *drama* than anything that Marlowe wrote.

It is natural to regret his untimely death. But, had he lived, he would not have rivalled, much less outstripped Shakespeare. His work had already begun to show a falling off when his life was cut short. His touch was bold, but without subtlety. He had little sense of construction and only one of his plays leads effectively to a climax. His women, too, were unconvincing. Most serious of all he had, apparently, no sense of humour, a defect involving, as it did with Victor Hugo, an absence of the power of self criticism. But he showed succeeding playwrights that great themes could be handled by English dramatists, and, though his treatment was often at fault, he paved the way and left behind him verse that set a standard and provided a model for the writers of an illustrious generation. Nor have his greatest lines ever been surpassed.

## CHAPTER III

### SHAKESPEARE

SIR NIGEL PLAYFAIR remarked in his book on the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith that 'great drama can only live when it is acted.'

This seems a commonplace statement at first sight, but Shakespeare in particular suffered for long from a failure to appreciate the truth of it. Some critics went so far as to refer to his plays as poems, giving the impression that they were meant merely to be read in the study or commented on in the class-room. There can be no more fatal mistake than this.

A play only really becomes a play when it is staged. It needs more than an author to complete it. It requires the services of players, producer and audience as well. The extent of the rôle played by the producer is open to question. Much ink has been spilt and many tempers lost in discussing it. But the principle remains unaffected. A great play read, but not produced, can be no more satisfactorily enjoyed or appraised than a book with the leaves uncut.

The ill-treatment which Shakespeare endured was due in large measure to the alteration in stage conditions inaugurated at the Restoration and progressively increased ever since. Bit by bit the projecting apron stage was withdrawn. The system of lighting introduced by Garrick after his visit to France, which illuminated the space *behind* the proscenium arch, caused the area in front to be less and less used and hastened the advent of the modern picture-frame stage, with the

footlights erecting an absolute barrier between the players and the audience.

The introduction of elaborate scenery dealt an even more crushing blow to Shakespeare. In a realistic setting it became impossible to stage such a piece as *Antony and Cleopatra* with its 28 changes of scene. The result was that the plays were cut about and arbitrarily divided into acts, so as to fit into the prevailing method of presentation. Scenes were omitted or transposed. Breaks occurred where the action should have gone smoothly forward, and the effect of this mutilation was to destroy the whole intricate pattern. With Irving this practice of forcing a play, written for the flexible Elizabethan convention, into the rigid limits of the picture-frame stage, was carried to its furthest extent.

He took the greatest pains to secure the effect at which he aimed. His settings were elaborate and, so far as possible, accurate. Garrick had played Macbeth in the uniform of an 18th century general. Irving wore period costume. His productions were often memorable, but they were in a sense disastrous for Shakespeare.

Irving was a magnificent actor. Very naturally he made the most of his gifts. But the 'star' system often has a fatal defect, except in the case of a piece written for and round a particular player. With Irving as the central figure, the parts of other actors were liable to be reduced, in order not to detract from the impression created by the one dominant character. It is absurd to take the view that Shakespeare never wrote a bad line. Nevertheless, this modification of the original text upset the balance as surely as did a realistic system of production, admirable for a neat Pinero play, but hopelessly ill-adapted to the spacious Elizabethan drama.

A reaction against this method of presentation

took place in the early years of this century. To Mr. William Powell and to Mr. Harley Granville Barker belongs the chief credit for the adoption of a form of production better suited to Shakespeare's plays.

They presented them in their entirety. Proportion was not lost by giving greater prominence than the text warranted to any individual performer, whilst the difficulties of staging the whole complex panorama were got round by doing away with costly realistic scenery and using curtains or simple settings with the minimum of accessories. What the production lost thereby in spectacular beauty, it gained in smoothness.

By this means, too, the intrinsic merit of the plays themselves was revealed. Moreover, while the pattern of the work was preserved, the collaboration of the audience was enlisted, a factor difficult to define, but essential to good dramatic production. The spectator found himself under the necessity of using his imagination, as he was meant to do. He was called upon to visualise the setting by listening to Shakespeare's own descriptions, instead of contemplating the results of the producer's ingenuity in endeavouring to make 'the morn in sunset mantle clad,' walk convincingly 'o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.' He was rewarded for his mental effort by realising the full beauty of the words regarded hitherto as mere adjuncts to a realistic setting.

We are still far, of course, from being able to get the maximum of enjoyment from the delivery of Shakespeare's verse. Nor is this defect likely to be speedily remedied. We have grown accustomed to drawing-room comedy and restrained acting. Our whole training tends to make us grow hot under the collar at any outward display of emotion and actors themselves find it difficult to speak poetic lines with feeling, but without rant.

On the other hand, the attitude towards Shakespeare, both of the audience and more especially of the actor, has become vastly more intelligent. The player has made real and successful attempts to get under the skin of Shakespearean characters, to understand their psychology, and this has added enormously to the sensitiveness and insight of their interpretations.

The simple method of production has not passed unchallenged. There have been the imaginative settings of Mr. Gordon Craig and the stylised productions of Komisarjevsky. To criticise them is to tread on dangerous ground, since it brings us back to the old controversy over the precise rôle of the scenic artist and the producer. Their work may legitimately aspire to be more than a mere background. It may illustrate the atmosphere of the play or reveal the author's mood. But the danger lies in the fact that, without extreme care, the production may distract the attention of the audience from the words and actions of the players. After all, 'the play's the thing'.

This does not mean that the ideal is to reproduce exactly the conditions of the Elizabethan stage. That convention is now so alien to us that the effect is likely to be as incongruous in one direction as a presentation of *Hamlet* in modern clothes was in another. Furthermore, as Mr. Tyrone Guthrie remarked in a recent broadcast talk, there is a very real risk of slavish adherence to the Elizabethan canon causing an unfortunate impression of preciousness. The solution seems to lie in a form of production simple enough to allow the play to be given in a straightforward manner and utilising all the resources of modern lighting and grouping.

Something more is involved in this question of production than a mere matter of taste. The work of an artist in any sphere is largely governed by his medium. Shakespeare's works were written specifically



for the Elizabethan theatre. There is no obligation for us to adopt its conventions in presenting them to-day. A knowledge of the stage conditions of his time is none the less essential to any proper understanding of Shakespeare as a dramatist.

The Globe theatre, as everybody knows, was very small. Professor Dover Wilson puts the auditorium as being roughly the size of a lawn-tennis court, into which jutted a stage, estimated by the same authority to measure about 43 feet by 27.

It follows that this platform, raised some three or four feet above the floor, was surrounded on three sides by the groundlings. Wealthier spectators, seated in three tiers of galleries round the walls, were also fairly close to the stage, on which, moreover, stools were placed at either side for the accommodation of privileged onlookers. Altogether the atmosphere must have been extremely intimate.

This intimacy explains much that appears incongruous at first sight to a generation accustomed to modern plays that strive primarily to give the illusion of reality. For one thing this seeking after the realistic has brought the soliloquy into disrepute. But in the Shakespearean theatre the player was one with the spectators, not aloof from them. The public were participants almost as much as onlookers, and a soliloquy was not an unnatural revelation of a character's state of mind, but a direct communing with an audience almost as much exercised as himself over the problem confronting him.

The familiar, almost domestic atmosphere of the theatre made it much easier for the spectators to enter into the spirit of the play. They were far more ready to identify themselves with the characters on the stage than the members of a modern audience who, in witnessing a costume piece, are instantly reminded by the very accuracy of the period dress and the

remoteness of the stage that they are looking at something in which they have little personal concern. To the Elizabethans this was not so. They could not attain realism and never thought of attempting it. But they were prepared to share to a great extent in the emotions of the characters and to see themselves in the figures standing on the stage set in their midst. For this reason they cared nothing for the anachronisms, so reprovingly indicated in our annotated text-books. In their view it was quite in order for the personages to wear Elizabethan doublets, whatever the ostensible period of the play. They found it natural, because to many of them the story unfolded was contemporary and actual.

It does not follow from this that the whole audience was necessarily more guileless than a modern one. The rowdiness of the groundlings was out of proportion to their number. Solid citizens and nobility attended the public theatres, though ladies of fashion did not. Moreover many of Shakespeare's plays were performed at Court before a cultivated audience, very different from the gullible tradesman who figured so prominently later in Beaumont and Fletcher's delightful *Knight of the Burning Pestle*. The difference between spectators of that time and of our own was rather one of attitude than of intelligence.

It was a full-blooded age, too, in which culture was not incompatible with elementary, almost animal pleasures. It was an age newly freed from the shackles of medieval scholasticism and greedy for each and every experience of body, mind or spirit. The scope of human knowledge, of the very world itself had been suddenly enlarged. It was a time of great deeds and resounding discoveries, but one in which witchcraft, superstition and cruelty still flourished.

The *Globe* was well frequented. But so was the bear-pit hard by, and to fill the theatre strong dramatic

fare was needed. The Elizabethan playgoer certainly revelled in swift moving action. That by itself, however, was not enough. He showed, too, a passionate appreciation of language and a delight in the full-throated expression of emotion.

The same spectator did not necessarily enjoy all three. Wit, poetry, characterisation, fooling and violence gratified the taste of different sections of the house. One of the factors of Shakespeare's supremacy was his ability to satisfy all, and that, at his best, without undermining the structure of his play. This is particularly true of the comic element in what are otherwise essentially serious pieces. Most dramatists introduced their comic relief awkwardly as a mere sop to the taste of a portion of the audience. With Shakespeare it forms an integral part of the play. It is inseparable from it. The Porter's scene could not be removed from *Macbeth* without grave loss of dramatic tension, while to imagine *Henry IV* robbed of Falstaff is inconceivable.

The Elizabethan dramatist's appeal to the audience was made both to the eye and to the ear. Despite the lack of scenery there was plenty to arrest the spectator's attention. Costumes were often resplendent. The actor was trained to make free use of gesture. He was expected, too, to dance with grace and especially to fence with skill, for the onlooker of those days knew as much about sword-play as the modern spectator at a football match does of the fine points of the game. There were processions and marchings to and fro, also, to take the eye, whilst the battles, so often mere ineffective scurrings from one side of the modern stage to the other, could be carried out with conviction and vigour on a four-cornered platform projecting well into the auditorium. The greatest appeal, however, was to the ear. It was an accepted heritage from the classics and the mysteries that verse should be

the natural medium for drama. The actors were trained to deliver splendid verse and the audience to appreciate it. The importance of the poetic element differed from play to play. Sometimes, as in *Tamburlaine*, it was pre-eminent. Sometimes the verse was subordinated to the plot. In Shakespeare's greatest works the play was a fused unity of words and action.

The Elizabethan theatre with its simple properties lent itself, aided by the imagination of the audience, to the representation of varied action. The stage was so unlocalised that the scene could shift freely from Rome to Alexandria, from a blasted heath to Macbeth's castle, from Priam's palace to the Greek camp, without any interruption and with a bare word or two to indicate the change. The gallery at the back served equally well for Cleopatra's monument or Juliet's balcony, whilst the space below it could take on the likeness, for the moment, of Prospero's cell, Dr. Faustus' study or Polonius' hiding place. Furthermore, a character might step from this recess to the forefront of the stage and still remain, in the imagination of the audience, in the same room. He took, as it were, his locality with him.

This spacious convention that gave such freedom and elasticity to the stage carried with it an inherent danger. The form was so loose that it encouraged shapelessness. Most Elizabethan dramatists mistook liberty for licence. They introduced slabs of low comedy or lurid scenes of bloodshed and marred the line and dramatic unity of their plays. Shakespeare avoided this snare. He might flaunt his cloak, but it fitted, neither dragging in the mud nor flapping in the breeze. He realised, in other words, the difficulties of structure and that, as much as his own ability to create great characters, raised him head and shoulders above the best of his fellows.

attention on the tragedies to the neglect of the comedies and histories, were apt to regard Shakespeare as a dignified sage. Others looked upon him as a remote individual unaffected by the events of his own time and apparently producing his plays in the manner of the legendary German who, having never seen a camel, evolved the idea of one out of his inner consciousness. Yet a third group considered him a dramatic Vicar of Bray, writing with his eye solely on the box office and shifting from tragedy to comedy according to the popular demand of the moment.

There is something fundamentally amiss with these views. To begin with Shakespeare was not a venerable person. He was never old. His last play was written when he was 48 and he died at 52. Nor was he uninterested in what went on around him. His plays contain many topical allusions, though they are generally introduced lightly, either from fear of causing offence by a too direct reference or because he was too good a dramatist to give undue prominence to something of transitory interest. But, though we do not always know to which 'poor cat in the adage' he is alluding, the references are undeniably present. And there is much more positive evidence of his interest in contemporary affairs. It was the trial of Dr. Lopez for an alleged attempted poisoning of the Queen that caused him to re-handle an old play and give us *The Merchant of Venice*. In the same way the wreck of a vessel off the Bermudas in 1609 must have furnished him with a starting point for *The Tempest*, whilst the Histories could never have been written by a man not keenly interested in his own country and deeply conscious of the part played by Elizabeth in the maintenance of a state of prosperity and greatness, so markedly in contrast with the troubles and disorders of the past.

Naturally, as a practising playwright with a living

to earn, Shakespeare saw the topical value of certain events. But he was far from being a dramatic time-server. He certainly wrote to please his audience. He also wrote to please his patrons, notably the young Earl of Southampton, to whom it is now generally agreed that the Sonnets were addressed. It is a significant fact that many of his early comedies, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, together with that magnificent love poem *Romeo and Juliet*, contain dashing roistering young gallants, as enamoured of wit as of women, the very prototypes of Southampton himself.

But these were of the kind to appeal to Shakespeare too. Even more than to content his patrons or the public he wrote to please himself. The plays of his early and middle period have too much verve, vitality and gusto to be the cold products of a conscientious dramatist writing to order. They were not the work of a prig or a recluse. They were written by a man drunk with beauty and aglow with the zest for living. The plays themselves reveal this just as fully as they show his love of the countryside, his eye for picturesque detail or his joy in the swift interplay of words. Ben Jonson, who held decidedly opposed views to Shakespeare in matters of dramatic art, roundly declared : 'I did love the man this side idolatry as much as any.' And blunt, quarrelsome Ben would have had no use for an effeminate weakling. Nor could such a person have created a gorgeous rascal like Falstaff.

We know so little of Shakespeare's life that it is impossible to say categorically what made him turn his attention in later years to tragedy rather than comedy. Some private sorrow, some unlucky love affair may have directed his thoughts into a more sombre channel. It may be that, having carried comedy to its highest pitch, he sought for fresh fields

Southampton was closely associated must have exerted a profound effect upon him. His execution certainly marked the close of a joyous, self-confident era more actually than the death of Elizabeth and the advent of vulgar, pedantic, undignified James two years later.

Professor Dover Wilson suggests that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's attempt to understand Essex in the form of a drama, whilst *Henry V*, written shortly before the favourite's departure for his ill-fated Irish expedition is, not a portrait, but a plea to him to take upon himself the kingly character of that monarch.

The temptation to accept this view is strong, but positive proof is lacking. Be the causes what they may, however, it is surely clear, if we set aside the untenable theory of Shakespeare as a detached, Sphinx-like Olympian, that the great tragedies were written under the stress of a deep spiritual and emotional experience. Shakespeare could not have been the dramatist he was, had he not also been intensely sensitive.

The acid, cynical note of *Measure for Measure* points unmistakably to a mood of disillusionment. The note of pessimism deepens for a space with each successive tragedy. *Julius Cæsar* is a tragedy not of evil but of weakness. In *Hamlet* evil assumes a larger and more sinister rôle, but weakness of character is still the prime cause of disaster. With *Othello*, evil unalloyed is embodied in Iago. In *King Lear* sheer horror stalks the stage and untold depths of human misery and brutality are disclosed.

If Shakespeare was trying to give 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure,' he must have recoiled in terror from what he found revealed. And this, surely, is the explanation of his mental and spiritual anguish. Whatever reasons induced him to follow the road of tragedy in the first place, it was his discoveries as he made his way along it that brought him near

the brink of that madness beyond which Lear passed. His faith in the purpose of the Universe was shaken. He was lost in the perilous darkness which engulfed his characters.

But he pressed forward and the gloom grew less. In *Macbeth* tragedy is brought about by the actions of human beings, not solely by the forces of evil. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the atmosphere is altogether clearer. The protagonists come to a miserable and ignominious end, but the libertine and the wanton have been ennobled by the very splendour of the love that destroyed them. Shakespeare had got at last into calm waters. Humanity might still have depraved and bestial qualities, but they were offset by compensating virtues, nobility, spiritual greatness, indomitable will. Shakespeare recovered his balance, and a serenity, the greater for past harrowing experience, coloured *The Tempest*, in which he made his incomparable farewell to the stage.

The intensity of his feelings as a man increased his skill and perception as a dramatist. His most complete and subtle characters were created during the period when his sombre mood led him to explore the darkest recesses of the human heart.

He had long since mastered the art of drawing comic characters. Falstaff, the finest, had made his final bow in Henry V. Shylock, the first of his outstanding serious figures, finely drawn though he was, did not reveal new facets as the play went on. He was static not dynamic. He was a miser first and last.

But the great figures of the later tragedies are far more complex. They develop progressively and emerge so complete that generations of critics have been able to remove them from their setting and speculate over their motives, ideas and philosophy. Yet Shakespeare never manipulated the plot so as to parade their characteristics. On the contrary it is *their* characters



that condition the inevitable course and issue of the plot.

Shakespeare could harp on every string and produce exquisite music. He could mingle the comic with the tragic, couple the loftiest verse with the bluntest of prose and oppose to the exaltation of Romeo the homely utterances of the nurse. His characters were infinitely varied. They constitute the most precious collection of portraits painted by any playwright.

He, if anyone, saw life clearly and saw it whole. But he set down what he saw in superb language and with the skill and creative imagination of an unrivalled dramatic artist. Finally—and this is perhaps the most vital clue to his greatness—he held the balance (to quote Professor Dover Wilson once again) ‘between pitiless observation and divine compassion’. We see Shylock with his cunning, his sordid meanness and his cruelty. And yet that final tremendous exit after the trial fills us with reluctant sympathy and genuine indignation at his scurvy treatment. Dramatic art could go no further.

## CHAPTER IV

### BEN JONSON AND THE JACOBEOANS

LITERARY labels are notoriously misleading. To term Jonson a classicist and a realist is to force him into a category to which he only partly belongs. There is, nevertheless, something to be said for the description. A close friend of Shakespeare, Jonson differed much from him in dramatic method. A true representative of his time in some respects, he yet anticipated the 18th century in others. Dryden and the Augustan playwrights owed more to Jonson than to Shakespeare.

His life is far better known than that of his greater companion and rival. Ben Jonson came of Scottish lowland stock. His grandfather hailed from Annandale and migrated to England. His father lost his estates under Queen Mary, entered the Church and died a month before Ben was born early in 1573. His mother took a second husband, a bricklayer, and Jonson was for a while apprenticed to the trade, a fact of which his enemies often reminded him. Fortunately he was befriended by William Camden of Westminster School, to whom he subsequently dedicated *Every Man in his Humour*.

Having gained the elements of a classical education at Westminster, Jonson enlisted and fought in Flanders against the Spanish. He returned from abroad penniless, and soon afterwards married. Two epitaphs on his children point to his family affection, but he did not get on too well with his wife. Legend rather than fact hints that Shakespeare's union was not over happy.

In Jonson's case there is less doubt. He described his partner as 'a shrew, yet honest'.

At what date Jonson became an actor we do not know. But in 1597 he was one of the 'Admiral's Men', under the grasping Philip Henslowe, father-in-law of the famous actor Edward Alleyn. For him he did dramatic hack-work, contributing some scenes to Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, in which, ironically enough, he played the ranting Hieronimo, a part wholly opposed to his own notions of dramatic fitness.

The next year he had a quarrel with a truculent fellow-player, named Gabriel Spencer, and killed him. Duelling among the nobility was common. For a mere actor it was a breach of the peace, and Ben was tried at the Old Bailey. But according to a quaint and merciful custom of the time Jonson, as an educated man, was able to plead 'benefit of clergy'. The proof of learning required was not exacting. All who could read might claim exemption from sentence in certain cases for a first offence, and Jonson duly read aloud the 51st Psalm. So, to the lasting advantage of the drama, he was pardoned. But his goods, such as they were, were confiscated, and the letter T, for Tyburn, branded as a warning and a reminder on the ball of his thumb.

After that there was naturally no going back to the angry Henslowe and Jonson offered his services to the Lord Chamberlain's Company, in which Shakespeare was a shareholder. It was by these players that *Every Man in his Humour* was first performed, probably in the late summer of 1598.

This is an epoch making play, because of the theory on which it is based. To begin with, Jonson was a classicist in so far as he opposed artistic restraint to the often uncontrolled verve of the English Renaissance spirit. He deplored the haphazard structure and careless workmanship of so many contemporary

plays. He was not a strict adherent of the classical writers, for he maintained that the modern dramatists had as much right to invent as the ancients and were not to be condemned to the rigid observation of classical forms. For all that, his plots were much closer to the simplicity of the Greeks than to the exuberant complexity of the Elizabethans. The story of *Every Man* showed no more than an anxious father following his son to London and beholding with alarm his manner of life among the town gallants. This sobriety was deliberate. It was the outcome of the dramatic ideas propounded in Jonson's challenging prefaces. Of these the theory of 'humours' is the most significant and the most characteristic.

Modern medical thought ascribes various ailments and eccentricities to the abnormal condition of certain glands. In Jonson's day there was a widespread belief that a man's physical and mental make-up was determined by the particular blending in him of four liquids or 'humours'. These, black bile, red bile or choler, blood and phlegm were held to correspond to the four elements, earth, fire, air and water, which were considered at that time to be the ultimate constituents of all matter. The mixture of these 'humours' in the individual determined his temperament or disposition. The excess of one produced a corresponding excess of the mental quality involved, and the man showed himself sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic or melancholy as the case might be. 'Humour', in short, meant any idiosyncrasy which coloured a man's nature and generally revealed itself in some caprice or mannerism.

This kind of comedy is essentially a portrayal of types, in which each "humourist" becomes a crank through the exaggeration of some recognisable quality. In inexperienced hands the result would be no more than a puppet play, but Jonson never made the mistake of

degrading the 'humour' into a mere eccentricity of manner through failure to show the underlying characteristic that produced it. Shakespeare used 'humour' comedy on occasion, but, with the exception of Malvolio, not for a leading personage. With Jonson the 'humour-character' was all important, and he drew his figures with sufficient vividness to give them the likeness of humanity, if not life itself. He was writing a form of comedy of manners in which he portrayed people as he chose to see them. And the angle from which he looked at them was satirical.

Jonson was very decided in his views. His natural arrogance was backed by the conviction that he was right, and references to the 'monsters' to be found in the plays of other dramatists provoked an enmity, which came to a head in the 'war of the theatres.'

Marston in his *Histrionomastix* is supposed to have represented Jonson under the guise of a bedraggled and scornful poet. The latter retaliated with *Every Man Out of his Humour* which ridiculed, among others Marston, Charles, Chester, an incorrigible gossip, and Samuel Daniel whose post as court poet Jonson coveted.

The play itself shows how each character is led to see that his own particular 'humour' is either absurd or disastrous, the unpleasant revelation being brought about by a man whose foible is an envy that inspires him to expose the shortcomings of everybody else. This satire raises dramatic lampoon to the dignity of an art. But the tone is very bitter and this acerbity is apparent in *Cynthia's Revels* and still more in *The Poetaster*, acted in 1601 by the 'children of the Chapel.' Here, side by side with the story of Ovid's banishment to Tomi for his presumption in falling in love with the Emperor's daughter, we are shown the failure of a conspiracy to bring about the disgrace of Horace. Jonson, of course, was Horace, whilst Marston and

Dekker figured in the thankless rôles of the discomfited plotters.

The quarrel came to an end eventually and Jonson, changing his style, wrote two tragedies, *Sejanus* and *Catiline his Conspiracy*, on classical lines. Shakespeare had captured the atmosphere of antiquity, but Jonson who was a good scholar—he received £20 every New Year's Day from the Earl of Pembroke for the purchase of books—consulted many authorities in order to ensure accuracy of detail. This was all part of his hatred of the slipshod. Both were stately well-constructed pieces of work. But they were cold, and the classical method of describing, instead of depicting deeds of violence did not commend them to the groundlings. Moreover, conspiracy was in the air. Raleigh was in the Tower, and Jonson, suspected of sedition, was hailed before the Privy Council.

He was acquitted, however, and managing at last to oust his rival Daniel, began to write court masques. His verses and the elaborate stage sets of Inigo Jones, the royal architect, combined to raise this form of entertainment to a higher pitch of excellence than ever before.

These productions were by their very nature of inferior dramatic worth and, from the point of view of posterity, it was no great disaster when Jonson lost favour mainly through the jealous machinations of Inigo Jones. But it was a serious financial blow to him. Employment at Court or under the Government was the goal of every writer's ambition in an age when it was difficult to earn a living solely by the pen. Shakespeare, of course, was comparatively well off. But then, besides the gifts of patrons, he received money as actor, playwright and part owner of a theatre.

Jonson had no such ample means. His girth was greater than his wealth and, in the hope of growing slimmer, he adopted the heroic expedient of walking to

Scotland, where the freedom of Edinburgh was bestowed on him. On his return, still as obese as before, he was appointed Chronologer to the City of London.

But matters went hardly with him. He lost his post. Royal patronage was uncertain and he began with scant success to write again for the stage. His health was beginning to fail and the Mermaid Tavern saw him no more. Finally he took to his bed, keeping a live fox in his room to ward off apoplexy. But the pungent remedy was unavailing and he died in 1637.

He was buried in Westminster Abbey and there was talk of erecting a memorial to him. But the Civil War was brewing and nothing was done. One day a man named Young, walking in the Abbey, saw the stone being fitted into place. He gave the mason eighteenpence to carve an inscription, and thus there came into being the familiar and not inadequate epitaph: 'O Rare Ben Jonson.'

More than on the plays already mentioned Jonson's fame depends on *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Volpone* (1605). The first shows a rascally servant, left in charge of his master's house, setting up a trickster's establishment with two accomplices. Their clients Dapper the clerk, Druggier the tobacconist, Tribulation Wholesome the Dutch pastor and Sir Epicure Mammon have each their particular foible and their fleecing gives opportunity for first rate 'humour-comedy.' The play is not, like *Every Man*, a study of affectation or folly, but of frank knavery, redeemed from repulsiveness by abounding gusto.

*Volpone* depicts a miser accumulating wealth by deluding credulous and greedy parasites, in whose ultimate ruin he shares.

Both these plays show Jonson at his best. Naturally, the characters are types. Their names reveal them as such, and the practice, originating in the moralities and popularised by Jonson, endured to the time of Dickens

and Thackeray. But they are something more than types. They very nearly come to life as individuals. Their absence of development, however, prevents them from being fully alive, whilst the detailed description of their characters, that he gives in the list of *dramatis personae*, is in itself a proof of his inability to make them reveal themselves.

They do not change or grow under the stress of circumstance as Shakespeare's characters do. Volpone is as much a miser at the beginning as at the end. The clever control of the plot, the acute observation combine to produce a wonderfully powerful presentation of avarice. But it remains a portrait, not a complete living figure.

Jonson's work, however, showed immense vitality. *Bartholomew Fair* is the outstanding example. He had a keen sense of form and a scholarly mind. He knew his London as Dickens did, though he was a satirist not a sentimentalist. He had much in common with Molière, while lacking the Frenchman's humanity. He possessed more intellectual than creative imagination, and he shares with Bernard Shaw the preference for lively talk to action or to the portrayal of emotion. But, though he forges a link with our time, Jonson would have been more fully at home in the 18th century. Even so, in his own day he was second only to Shakespeare, with most of whose dramatic ideas he must have been largely at variance.

The works of Jonson's opponents in the 'war of the theatres' show the failings typical of many prominent dramatists of the age. Chapman's tragedies, which dealt with recent events in French history, were powerfully conceived, but marred by over-wordiness.

Marston's plays suffered from improbability not so much of event as of psychology. The emotional changes of his character were not brought about as a logical result of the events that befell them, but arbitrarily made



so as to render possible a sudden twist in the plot required by the author.

These faults were even more noticeable in the work of Thomas Heywood. He wrote with enormous speed and only in *A Woman killed with Kindness*, a poignant study of an emotional crisis between ordinary middle-class people, did he avoid them.

Most of Dekker's plays likewise show the same defects. Added to them is the more serious one of a low comedy plot, clumsily introduced and having no real connection with the main theme. This breach of artistic taste, apparent in so many works of the period, was often due to the fact that plays were written for a particular company, whose low comedian was a popular favourite and had, perforce, to be provided with a part.

In *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, a play with a jolly, wholesome humanity about it, exemplified in the person of Simon Eyre with his entire lack of self-consciousness, his kind heart, his bluff good humour and his racy speech, this flaw is absent. But it was a widespread one and when French influence made itself felt after the Restoration the reaction against the sub-plot had already begun.

During the reign of James I a change came over tragedy.

Shakespeare's themes, in themselves, had been simple. He wrote of general and perennial vices like jealousy or ambition. And then, gradually, doubt began to creep in. Shakespeare mastered it. But later writers did not and confidence gave way to uncertainty and despondency.

The Renaissance was thirsty for knowledge and appreciative of art and beauty, but it was a movement built, in the main, on no solid foundation of morality. So, when the first fine careless rapture was over, the dramatists, as representatives in some measure of prevailing ideas, found themselves in the depths of a spiritual despair.

The complexion of the world seemed to have undergone a change. Men were no longer so sure that the old answers to fundamental or eternal questions were the right ones. Machiavelli, whom they read and but partly understood, showed them a godless, soulless universe, with self-seeking, cynical aggression for its only rule.

Real life had become disconcerting, and therefore literature tended to become an escape from, rather than a portrayal of it. In Shakespearean plays there had been some standard of morality, either expressed or implied. Iago and Shylock were villains in comparison with a recognised code of behaviour. But once moral standards were called in question, tragedies lost their old moral significance, since the characters in them were not to be judged by any accepted measure.

This meant, in a sense, that characterisation went by the board. Psychology certainly retained a place, and the characters depicted were highly complex. But the plays no longer dealt with fundamental or eternal qualities. Dramatists searched instead for far-fetched situations and abnormal personages. Straightforward murder gave way to hideous treachery, illicit love to incest. Horror was piled on horror with sadistic pleasure.

Middleton's *The Changeling* and still more, Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) reveal the characteristics of this later period. The personages are compact of evil, without conscience. They have no decency, no standard of conduct, but, in the case of Webster particularly, the plays take on a vivid, macabre power. 'The beings in them,' wrote Rupert Brooke, 'are writhing maggots in an immense night. And the night is without stars or moon. But it has sometimes a certain quietude in its darkness: but not very much.'

The horror in these tragedies, though extreme, is

seldom crude. The story is unfolded with a sombre mastery, whilst the characters, in default of virtue, have unfaltering courage in their villainy and the language put into their mouths is often magnificent. The plays, in a word, are examples of superb decadence.

With Webster tragedy escaped from reality to a world of nightmare. With Beaumont (1585-1616) and Fletcher (1579-1625) it escaped to a world of attractive, sugary romance, in which the rules of normal everyday life do not hold good. The detective thriller and the sentimental novel are, in some sort, parallel manifestations of the same craving for escape in our own post-war epoch.

The decadence of Beaumont and Fletcher, superficially attractive, was more disastrous to the cause of good drama than Webster's. The change was dictated in part by the difference between the Court of Elizabeth and that of James. The men of the earlier period might be unscrupulous, but they were intellectual and robust. James's courtiers—and the influence of the Court on the theatre became increasingly marked—were cast in a meaner mould. The spacious drama with its interest in enduring human qualities made them uncomfortable. They liked display, excitement, bawdy jokes, as the Elizabethans had done, but they shrank from the profundities of emotion. Shallow brilliancy and strong sensation pleased them better than deep feeling. A moral code based on fundamental truths made no appeal to them. But Webster's absence of any moral code whatever proved equally distasteful. They turned instead to situations founded on a quite artificial theory of honour, in which the characters were not human beings to be judged by their real virtues or vices, but puppets to be appraised by a wholly false standard of values.

The result, dramatically, was tragi-comedy. This type of play was tragic enough to include gods and exalted personages, and comic enough to contain humbler folk. Above all it was pleasant to watch, since the

tragedy never became intense and the love interest was as strong and unreal as that of a modern novelette. It is only fair to add that the versification was often very fine, while the plots, of which there were generally two, were neatly dovetailed together in the Shakespearean manner.

Beaumont and Fletcher wrote fifty-two plays. Sometimes they worked separately, and Fletcher, who outlived his partner by nine years, continued to write after his death. That really lovely masque *The Faithful Shepherdess* is Fletcher's alone, whilst *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, in which a citizen, carried away by a play, continually interrupts the action so that his apprentice, who is acting in it, may bear off the honours, is almost entirely the work of Beaumont.

Judged purely as entertainment, the plays had considerable merit. Beaumont and Fletcher were highly competent craftsmen, though not great dramatists. Where they fall short so dismally in comparison with Shakespeare or Ben Jonson is in the characterisation. Language and situation are frequently admirable. But the personages are well-defined types in whose emotional distress it is impossible to believe. Their actions are often at variance with their supposed character. Psychologically they do not really exist. One of their best-known plays, *Philaster*, illustrates all these points.

*Philaster*, like *Hamlet*, is unlawfully kept from the throne. The usurper, to safeguard his unstable position, wishes to marry his daughter Arethusa to a Spanish prince, whose boastfulness provides the comic element of the play. Arethusa and *Philaster* confess their mutual love for one another and he gives her his page, Bellario, to carry messages between them. Malicious report then whispers that the page is Arethusa's lover and *Philaster*, believing the story, denounces her perfidy. The three meet in a forest during a hunt and *Philaster*, beside himself with jealousy, wounds both Arethusa

and Bellario. The latter generously takes the blame for the princess's injury on himself, and Philaster, struck by this magnanimity, admits his guilt. Arethusa, improbably enough, is permitted to decide on their punishment. In the outcome she marries Philaster in prison, the usurper is forced to acknowledge him as the rightful heir and the voice of slander is stilled by the revelation that Bellario is a girl, who had disguised herself out of love for Philaster. Even more improbably, Arethusa, knowing the girl's infatuation, retains her in their joint service, thereby ending a play, which, if it had any relation to real life, could certainly not have stopped short on the verge of so promising a situation!

The only noticeable point about this plot is the surprise ending. In *Twelfth Night* we are aware from the start that Viola and Cesario are one. The comedy depends on the fact that the audience are in the know, while Orsino and Olivia are not. The dramatist has taken them into his confidence and given them that feeling of comfortable superiority which Bergson describes as one of the main sources of merriment. In *Philaster* there is, of course, no idea of comedy behind the disguise. It was the surprise that counted. It was a convenient means of bringing to an illogical but satisfactory conclusion a play which was essentially false and exceedingly popular. Nor have writers of mystery thrillers neglected the same device.

A disciple of Beaumont and Fletcher, with the latter of whom he sometimes collaborated, was Philip Massinger (1583-1640). He was inferior to both as a poet, but easily surpassed them in dramatic force. Eighteen of his plays are extant, but it is not by his tragi-comedies on the Beaumont and Fletcher model that he is remembered. His fame rests on an excellent comedy, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, in which he reverted to the vigorous, well-planned "humour-comedy" of Jonson.

Dominating the play is the figure of the usurer Sir Giles Overreach, a character possibly suggested by the notorious Sir Giles Mompesson, who had himself appointed to an inn-licensing commission and enriched himself by prosecuting or blackmailing hundreds of landlords for violating statutes that were in fact obsolete.

Overreach is a powerful creation, a man to whom the acquisition of wealth, even more than the enjoyment of it, is the main purpose in life. Second to it comes his wish to ennoble his family by marrying his daughter to Lord Lovell. Both these obsessing desires are brought to naught by a scheme, executed by the nephew he has ruined and a despised creature of his own who has long concealed his rancorous hatred of his master. It is a fine play, anticipating Molière's *L'Avare* and similar to *Volpone*, though not all the characters are as contemptible as in Jonson's famous piece.

And there, without reference to Ford, Shirley, Tourneur, or Rowley, this short survey of the Jacobean dramatists must come to an end. General rather than particular tendencies have been noticed, faults rather than merits stressed. The good qualities were for the most part the familiar ones more fully represented in the work of Shakespeare.

These playwrights must be used to such summary treatment. They suffer inevitably from comparison with that one towering figure and lose their individuality by mass inclusion in a category immediately below the highest. They are not deserving of such a fate.

Nevertheless their work did mark a progressive falling off from the achievements of the great dramatic period. Horrors and unreality increased, as characterisation and truth lessened. Plays continued to be well-made and well-written. But there was no driving force behind them. The great conceptions of drama, the profound studies of human nature vanished away. When the Civil Wars and the Puritan régime closed

the theatres in 1642, the decline of the once great age had long since begun.

At their re-opening eighteen years later, the curtain rose on plays of a different kind. The Royalists had not been in exile in France for nothing.

## CHAPTER V

### CORNEILLE AND RACINE

THE Paris 'Parlement' in 1548 had forbidden the performance of mystery plays. But there was no ban on farces and moralities, which continued to hold the boards at the *Hôtel de Bourgogne*. Since this was the only properly equipped theatre in Paris and it still preserved the sole right of giving public performances in the capital and its suburbs, other forms of theatrical enterprise were relegated to the halls of colleges or the residences of the nobility.

Farces made no appeal to the cultivated section of the public, who looked to Ronsard and his friends to do for drama what they had already done for poetry. Du Bellay, the theorist of the group, called for the production of plays written on the lines of the classical authors of antiquity. This veneration for Greco-Latin literature, coupled with the difficulty of finding means to stage a play, led to an academic type of tragedy, which could only attract a limited few and was often only intended, like the rhetorical works of Seneca, the favourite model, to be read and not acted at all.

There was a considerable output, but the result was sadly lacking in vitality. Some of the tragedies, like Garnier's *Les Juives*, were on religious subjects. Others, such as Jodelle's *Cléopâtre* were direct imitations of ancient classical dramas, whilst a few, notably Montchrétien's *Reine d'Écosse*, dealt in the same stiff manner with events in recent history. None of them carried conviction. They were all as remote from



real living drama as their English contemporary *Gorboduc*.

Thus, by the close of the 16th century the theatre in France was at a very low ebb. The French Renaissance writers despised the Middle Ages and learned nothing from the stagecraft and vigour of the popular unliterary drama. Their own plays were cold, formal and scholastic. There was no trace of the fusion of literary quality with the surging, teeming medieval drama which helped to produce the glories of the Elizabethan age.

The first step towards better things was made in 1599. In that year the *Confrérie de la Passion*, wearying of their constant disputes with the authorities, leased the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* to a professional company, which had as its playwright a certain Alexandre Hardy.

This man was no genius, but he was a shrewd judge of public taste and he had an eye for dramatic effect, which the academic playwrights had wholly lacked. He had, too, immense facility and is credited with the writing or adaptation of some seven hundred plays. If he did present a classical tragedy he was careful to cut out anything that interfered with the already meagre action, but he specialised in tragi-comedy with plenty of bloodshed and a swashbuckling plot.

As a result, the theatre slowly gained ground. Playwrights began to allow their names to appear on the bills. People who would have been bored by Renaissance drama found something to their liking in tragi-comedy, while others, who had been wont to guffaw at the antics of booth-players or chuckle at the obscenities of the Italian comedians, began to realise the higher possibilities of the theatre.

Then in 1622 Hardy's company left Paris to go on tour and, with the withdrawal of that phenomenally prolific writer, the field was left open to other playwrights. A few years later, the monopoly being finally brought to an end, a second company established itself in Paris

at the *Théâtre du Marais* and the beginning of a great era in French dramatic history was close at hand.

French 17th century literature in general is so different, not only from the English Elizabethan, but also from that of the preceding century in France itself, that some indication of the various causes contributing to this alteration is absolutely vital to any appreciation of the work of Corneille and Racine.

Francis I, the pattern of a Renaissance prince, and the exact contemporary of Henry VIII, was continually on the move. Paris might be the capital, but it was seldom the seat of the Court. The king went from one to another of the great Renaissance châteaux, from Blois to Fontainebleau, from Chenonceaux to Chambord, the Venetian ambassador plaintively recording that he was never in the same place for more than a fortnight. But when Henry IV, by his conversion to Roman Catholicism, virtually put an end to those wars, which, despite their name, were so much more political than religious, there came a change.

The Edict of Nantes reassured all but the most fiery Huguenots. The Treaty of Vervins brought peace with Spain. The efforts of Sully led to the establishment of internal order. Roads and canals were made, agriculture fostered and new industries introduced.

Streets in Paris were paved and improved. The city began to take on an air befitting its dignity as the capital. The Pont-Neuf was built and the noble square of the Place Royale (now the Place des Vosges) housed some of the greatest families in the country. Above all, the Court was permanently established in Paris.

The effects of this process of centralisation, which reached its height later in the century, were widespread. With the return of peace and order commerce developed. The middle classes prospered and it was from their ranks that the great writers of the age were to come. Aspiring provincials flocked to Paris to make their

fortunes, whilst, under Louis XIV., the nobles left their estates to seek advancement by dancing attendance on the king.

One result of this was to bring the countryside into disrepute. The Renaissance writers had sung of the beauties of the woods and fields. The man of the 17th century, fixing his eyes on Paris, lost interest in the country. La Fontaine is a notable exception, and so, in lesser degree, are Mme. de Sévigné and Racine. But to most writers the idea of rural life was unbearable and convincing descriptions of Nature virtually disappeared.

There was plenty of talk about nature, but it meant man's moral nature. What interested 17th century authors was man considered as a social being, man in relation to his fellows rather than as an individual.

This outlook was encouraged by the growth of social life. The literary salons played an important part, especially that of Mme. de Rambouillet who, disgusted by the coarseness of Henry's bluff soldier-courtiers, entertained her guests in the series of intercommunicable rooms that formed the whole first floor of her hôtel. Her purpose was to refine manners, to create a cultivated taste in literature, to make social intercourse agreeable and charming. The salon had no political significance. It was a republic in which great nobles like La Rochefoucauld and a wine-merchant's son like Voiture could meet on terms of equality. Conversation was raised to the dignity of a fine art. It ranged over every topic and dwelt particularly on the subject of love. Not that any breath of scandal ever attached to the salon. On the contrary the atmosphere tended to become over-delicate and slightly ridiculous. Nevertheless, the refining feminine influence was highly beneficial, and it was in the salons more than anywhere else that was evolved that social type, the *honnête homme*, so prominent in contemporary drama, in whom a high standard of

social conduct was blended with a critical appreciation of literature. It is easy to over-estimate the extent of this refining influence. Any reading of the memoirs of the time reveals the underlying coarseness of the age. For all that, even if the salons did not bring about a far-reaching change in moral behaviour, they profoundly affected the tone of literature.

The salon was an unofficial tribunal sitting in judgment on questions of literary taste. The official parallel was the French Academy which, beginning as an informal gathering of friends, was transformed by Richelieu into an organised society under his patronage. Writing beautiful French himself, his aim was to make the language supreme in Europe. Rules, vocabulary and spelling were not irrevocably fixed, and he ordered the Academicians by means of a grammar (not published until 1932 !) and a dictionary (first issued in 1694 and constantly revised ever since) to discipline and standardise the language.

The work of the poet Malherbe tended in the same direction. He seemed to think that rhyme and metre constituted the sole difference between prose and verse. This was an absurd view, but there was some justification for it. The Renaissance poets had given full rein to their imagination. Admirable in short poems, their excellence was seldom long sustained. They were exuberant and careless. They devised hundreds of new metrical forms. They employed picturesque provincialisms and technical terms. If words did not exist they invented them.

Malherbe decided that it was far too easy to write bad verses. Poetry ought to be made difficult, so that the utmost resources of a man's mind were necessarily concentrated upon the work of composition. He sternly ruled out all the fanciful metres, though he retained the rolling twelve syllable Alexandrine, which was to the dramatists of the century what blank verse was to

the Elizabethans. Many expressions were rejected and only some 3,000 words, in contrast with Shakespeare's huge vocabulary, were considered sufficiently 'noble' to be used by a poet or a dramatist. Boileau, writing later in the century, advocated similar reforms, carefully defining the various literary *genres*, and insisting over and over again on the need for careful workmanship. He was pleading for the necessary virtues of artistic selection and restraint.

Another powerful influence was that of the philosopher Descartes. Surveying the ideas of his time, he came to the conclusion that much so-called knowledge rested on an unsound foundation. Things were accepted on the evidence of the senses unsupported by the testimony of the intellect. There was, in a word, a great deal of muddled thinking. Descartes distrusted the imagination and the senses and he worked out a system of philosophy in which, starting from the bare fact of man's existence, he progressed from stage to stage, only accepting as true those things which the God-given power of reasoning enabled him to believe. Some of his ideas were absurd, notably his theory that dogs were mere automata. But he cleared away a mass of unreliable pseudo-science and taught men how to think in a logical manner. Though most of his conclusions have been superseded, his *Discourse on Method* not only affected the thought of his time but also the work of all subsequent philosophers.

Descartes was rather a deist than a Christian. Pascal, who shares with La Rochefoucauld the first place as a writer of prose, was a great Christian thinker. And the religious element was another characteristic of French 17th century literature, in contrast to the frank paganism of much Renaissance writing. This showed itself in many ways, in the works of Bossuet or in the austere doctrines of Pascal's fellows at the Abbey of Port Royal. It ranged from bigotry to a perfunctory observation of outward forms. But, whether sincere

or superficial, it was present, and an age that permitted a considerable measure of obscenity and a widespread toleration of personal libel and lampoon was quick to punish anything remotely resembling blasphemy.

These were the chief factors contributing to the foundation of the outstanding writers of the French Classic age. They were not all in force at once. No single individual probably was affected by the whole list of them, for some only exerted a very indirect influence on literature. Nor was the victory ever complete. Boileau towards the close of the century was still railing at the defects which Malherbe had attacked at the beginning, while there were numerous writers of the second rank who obstinately refused to conform to the new ideas.

Nevertheless, the main trend was clearly enough defined. Literature was social and restrained instead of individual and imaginative. For the exuberance of the Renaissance we have lucidity, and a recognition that the production of good literature is a task requiring all the resources of a trained and patient intellect. Furthermore, the shackling of the poet's fancy, the restrictions placed on his metre and vocabulary, the exalting of reason over imagination dealt a mortal blow to lyric poetry. An immense amount of polished, witty occasional verse was written. But the real poetic impulse adapted itself to the new conditions and found an outlet in the drama which, the least developed literary form at the opening of the century, quickly became predominant. To Corneille belongs the credit of writing the first modern French tragedy.

Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), an ancestor of Charlotte Corday, was the son of a Rouen lawyer. His father procured him two sinecure offices and for many years he divided his time between Paris and his native town, only taking up permanent residence in the capital in 1662. His post at Rouen and, later, a grudgingly paid

pension, provided his chief means of subsistence. It was impossible at that time to make a living by the pen alone, since 4 francs per hundred lines was a normal rate of pay for verse, whilst plays became available for any company to perform, without payment, as soon as they were printed.

But, with a modest livelihood assured, Corneille was able to begin writing at an early age. His first plays were no better than those of such contemporaries as Rotrou and Mairet. His tragi-comedies showed the prevailing Spanish influence while his comedies were only an improvement on the works of others in that they were less improper. Their decency, however, did not atone for their dullness. It was only with the production of his tragedy, *Le Cid*, staged by Mondory's company at the *Théâtre du Marais*, probably at the close of 1636, that he first earned the title of 'The Great,' 'to distinguish him,' said the admiring Voltaire, 'not from his brother Thomas, but from the rest of mankind.'

The plot of this famous play is a strong one. An old noble is insulted by another, somewhat younger, and calls upon his son to wipe out the affront. The latter, Rodrigue, is torn between filial obligation and reluctance to fight the father of Chimène, his betrothed. In the end duty triumphs and the offender is slain. Chimène at once appeals to the king for justice and Rodrigue calls upon her to kill him. She cannot bring herself to do so and he, hearing of a sudden invasion of the Moors, places himself at the head of a small force, hoping to find death in the encounter. Instead he wins an unexpected victory and returns to the Court, where Chimène renews her pleas.

The king is unwilling to grant her request and an admirer puts his sword at her disposal. Rodrigue tells her that he will not defend himself, but her feelings get the better of her and she reveals her continued love for him. The subsequent appearance of Rodrigue's

opponent convinces her that her lover is dead, but the newcomer explains that he has been overcome and sent to lay his sword at her feet. Stifling her feelings once more, she again approaches the king. He, however, decrees that a year shall elapse during which she shall mourn her father, while Rodrigue combats the Moors, and the play ends with the prospect of the ultimate reconciliation and marriage of the two.

This play was deservedly successful. The people were recognisable beings grappling with real problems. They had to decide between conflicting duties, each, allowing for the Spanish code of honour, as imperious as the other. Corneille had grasped the essentials of a form of tragedy that was to reign supreme for the best part of two centuries. He had learned the Greek lesson that action was necessary to the structure of drama and also that it must be developed, not mechanically, but through the characters. These principles had not been combined in previous French tragedies, or, if they had, only in the unliterary drama of Hardy.

Nevertheless, there was no lack of criticism and the French Academy was eventually bidden by Richelieu to pass considered judgment on the play.

The Cardinal's attitude was comprehensible enough. Though the duels took place off the stage, they formed the mainspring of the plot, and he was doing his utmost to suppress a practice which cost the lives of some hundreds of gentlemen and nobles every year. Moreover, the play was an unwelcome glorification of Spanish ideas, when the country was engaged in a life and death struggle with the armies of Spain, which were, at that very moment, only a few miles from Amiens. A more trivial reason for his resentment was that Corneille had at one time formed one of a group of five authors, employed to work on Richelieu's own dramatic ideas, an uncongenial task from which he had withdrawn with unflattering readiness.



The main objections, however, came from other less successful dramatists who elected to see in *Le Cid* serious breaches of the dramatic rules. Pinning their faith on the ancients, the French writers of the classical age over-strained certain remarks of Aristotle and evolved a hard and fast code, with the strict letter of which the dramatist was expected to conform.

They adhered to the three "unities." The first of these decreed that there should be no essential change of scene during the course of the play: the second that all the events should occur within the space of 24 hours: the third that everything should be subordinated to the main action. It is no wonder, therefore, that they failed to appreciate Shakespeare whose scene changes nearly 30 times in one play, whilst in another there is a lapse of 20 years between one act and the next.

The unity of action was and is important. The work of many dramatists was formless and incoherent, and a moderate application of the unity of action would have simplified plays and helped to concentrate the attention of the audience on essential points, with a consequent heightening of dramatic effect. But the French school made the mistake of making the unities of time and place as important as the unity of action. The plea was that, by so doing, the spectator was rendered less aware that he was looking at fictitious and not real happenings. In practice, the result was often to increase the improbability that the application of the unities claimed to diminish. The playwright found himself striving to compress the beginning, development and outcome of a love affair into the space of one day. To conform with the unity of place he was obliged to lay his scene in some such spot as a public square where his characters met and discussed intimate matters which, in real life, they would never have dreamed of mentioning except in the privacy of their houses.

Left to itself, the unity of action would have proved

wholly beneficial, for the great literary qualities of the age were clarity, selection and restraint. Even in England it might have been applied with advantage sometimes. In France, where taste was, in any case, opposed to the mingling of comedy and tragedy, the rule meant the removal of irrelevancies, and a strength and beauty born of classic simplicity. But the arbitrary insistence on all three unities caused artificiality, and prevented the playwright from moving freely within the limits necessary to the proper revealing of his characters. It added a needless complication to an already extremely difficult task. No doubt the rules made for discipline and sobriety. But their cramping influence finally resulted in a sterility worse than the opposite vices of extravagance and diffuseness. It was for these conventions that the Romantics of the 19th Century reserved their deadliest hatred.

The Academy's censure of *Le Cid* was half-hearted. But Corneille was annoyed and for four years wrote no more. When he did, he took his themes from classical sources. In *Horace* he showed patriotism rising superior to personal feeling: in *Cinna*, the clemency of Augustus to the man whom love for a woman had induced to conspire against him. In *Polyeucte* he portrayed sacrifice of earthly love to religious conviction.

In all these plays Corneille revealed his conception of drama as a grand and ennobling thing, and he used a plot as intricate as the dramatic conventions allowed. There is much to be said for La Bruyère's remark that he painted men as they ought to be rather than as they are. He was not a subtle psychologist, but the very greatness of his themes enabled him to give a measure of humanity to the exalted creations of his fancy. His plays were a conflict between passion and duty, or between one loyalty and another. His characters were the embodiment of Descartes' belief in the power of reason.

Corneille's personages subject their hearts to their heads and, in often magnificent tirades, rise superior to the difficulties that confront them. They arouse admiration rather than pity and, in his later plays, their already limited humanity tends to disappear. They seem to choose the noble course of action, not because it is inevitable, but simply because it is the noble one. The ingenuity of the plot and the splendid language put into their mouths cannot redeem them from unreality. The onlookers lose interest in the spectacle of their sacrifice, because they cannot believe in the intensity of the feelings which the characters are so eloquently striving to overcome. These defects only became serious in Corneille's later work. The worst of his plays had power and dignity, but his lack of psychological insight caused him to sink into relative obscurity, while Racine, profiting by his pioneer work, gradually caught up and finally overtook his rival.

It is not easy for English people to appreciate the French classical dramatists. They seem cold and forbidding, observing a convention that is almost as mystifying as an unknown foreign tongue. And Racine, the greatest of them, is even more difficult to understand than Corneille. There are so many superficial obstacles to our enjoyment.

The language strikes us as stilted. Metaphors and picturesque images are few and far between. Servants have the same vocabulary as their masters. All violent action takes place off the stage. Nobody has a sense of humour. Heroines reveal their feelings tediously to their *confidantes* and seldom, in their most passionate moments, go further than to admit that they do not altogether detest the object of their adoration. Then, too, the structure is so spare, so simple that the characters have no background. We cannot imagine any of them working for a living or collecting stamps, still less having a cold in the head or suffering from indigestion. But

all this is merely the outcome of the 'noble' convention and of the rigorous exclusion of non-essentials.

The finest statues, whatever the prudish may say, are those that wear no clothes, and Racine allowed nothing to interfere with the pureness of his line. The absence of background does not mean that his characters are inhuman abstractions. They are not colourless embodiments of virtue or vice. They are living personifications of intense emotion, presented with such mastery that the last ounce of feeling is wrung from them, with no more included in the action than is needed to bring these vital emotions into play.

Corneille, with his secret liking for an intricate plot, had the greatest difficulty in confining his action within the prescribed bounds. Racine did it with ease. He made no attempt to show the slow development of an emotion. Instead he depicted it at the instant when circumstances had brought matters to a head, and concentrated all his skill on investing this culminating moment with terrific dramatic force.

In *Bérénice*, for instance, the chief characters are four and the whole action takes place during the space of a few hours in an ante-room of the palace. The question is merely whether Titus, raised unexpectedly to the Imperial throne and bound therefore by law to marry a Roman, shall defy tradition or repudiate the Queen of Palestine whom he loves. He hesitates, resolves, changes his mind and finally sends her away. That is the whole action, but it shows with incomparable art the mental torment and the character of the two.

Racine's plays did not generally end so gently. In *Britannicus* there is bloodshed, but the real horror and the consummate artistry lie in the astounding portrait of the young Nero, pictured at a turning point in his life and changing before our eyes into a monstrous sinister figure of evil. The play did not please. The first performance was given to a half empty house, since

the execution of a noble, fixed for the same hour, provided a grimmer and less costly real life spectacle. But many of those who were there thought *Britannicus* cold. They found nothing of Corneille's grand manner, no political intrigues, no clear sense of right and wrong, little incident or rhetoric, nothing but a gathering wave of emotion that engulfed the group of people in its path.

Corneille had looked on love as a secondary passion, something to be set aside by his noblest characters, who rated their glory higher than their personal feeling. With Racine love was an overpowering force, holding the characters in thrall and sweeping them irresistibly to destruction. There was nothing of the Roman matron about most of his women. They were helpless in the gust of passion. There is jealous Hermione urging Orestes to slay Pyrrhus, who has scorned her, and then turning on him with frantic reproaches as soon as he has obeyed her command. There is the tigerish Roxane murdering Bajazet because he has dared to prefer a humbler person to herself. Above all towers the tragic Phèdre, struggling vainly against incestuous passion and dying miserably by her own hand. Beside these piteous, memorable creations stand touching figures of young girls in the first shy ecstasy of love, and middle-aged men, cynical, cautious, devoted or corrupt, who give the lie to the accusation that Racine's psychological insight only extended to women.

At the first production of *Phèdre* he was the victim of an iniquitous cabal. The Duchesse de Bouillon, an intriguer and a partisan of Corneille, expended a huge sum on buying up seats for the first four performances, which were left empty, whilst her friends sedulously applauded a worthless play by Pradon, written on the same theme and staged at another playhouse.

Racine's conscience had long since troubled him. He had been brought up by the Jansenists of Port Royal who regarded the stage with horror. His own private

life had not been blameless, and a passionate love affair with Mlle. du Parc, for whom he had written the leading part in *Andromaque*, had ended unhappily with her death. This conspiracy against him completed his disgust both with himself and with the theatre. He retired into private life, married a provincial mayor's daughter, who never read his plays, and secured the post of Historiographe Royal, an office which he shared with the critic Boileau.

Never again did he work for the public stage. After twelve years he was prevailed upon by Mme. de Maintenon to write two plays on Biblical subjects for performance by the girls of the school she had founded at Saint-Cyr. *Esther* and *Athalie* were the result. Athaliah herself with her unscrupulousness and ruthless hatred is as vivid a character as the poet-dramatist ever created. But the passion of earthly love is almost wholly absent. Racine had grown calmer, more serene, genuinely devout, and the exquisite lyrical choruses woven into the play testify not only to the sincerity of his feeling, but to his power as a poet.

Writing under the same conditions as Corneille, he was utterly different from him. There were no purple passages in his writing. His verse was uniformly smooth and excellent. He depicted the ravages of love with a logic and perception which his rival could never have attained. Though his tragedies, with the exception of *Bajazet*, were derived from ancient sources, they possessed something more than the form and spirit of antiquity. The outlook of his characters, despite their classic dress, was often that of his own day and, though he lacked Corneille's command of the grandiose, Racine was a far more subtle dramatist. Moreover, the very absence of external accessories enabled him to draw characters who, once the difficulties of approach to him are overcome, are not only true to life, but true of all time.

Mme. de Sévigné, staunch partisan of Corneille, declared that Racine's popularity would be as ephemeral as that of that new-fangled beverage coffee. Posterity has proved her wrong on both points. But the liking for coffee is not universal. It is an acquired taste. The same is true of Jean Racine.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE AGE OF LOPE DE VEGA AND CALDERÓN

THE drama in Spain, as in England, grew out of the liturgical ceremonies of the Church. Primitive dialogues on Biblical themes presently gave way to mysteries. But they were very crude, and it was not until the Moors were finally driven from the country that literature revived and drama developed.

Another early form was the *entremés*. This was a dialogue without action, generally of a satirical kind, which took its name from the fact that it was given between the courses of a banquet in the dining-halls of great men's houses. There were, too, translations or imitations of Plautus.

At the end of the 15th century, the popular religious plays, the classical imitations and the *entremeses* all contributed something to the work of Juan del Encina, who wrote his plays for the entertainment of the Duke of Alba.

His *Cancionero* contains, in addition to a good deal of miscellaneous poetry, eight dramatic pieces in verse. They were mainly on religious subjects, but he sometimes developed the intrigue by dramatising Italian courtly novels. His main service was, therefore, to enrich and secularise the primitive Spanish drama.

He had many followers, notably Lucas Fernandez, who wrote simple plays of peasant love affairs. The dialogue was realistic, the humble folk speaking their natural rustic dialect. The metre, too, varied constantly. Both these features were characteristics of later Spanish



drama and in marked contrast with the 'noble' speech and rigid form of the French classical playwrights.

More important was Torres Naharro who, after being held captive in Algiers, took Holy Orders on his release and settled in Naples. He had definite dramatic theories, classing all comedies as either realistic or romantic. To the first category belong his series of guard-house and kitchen scenes with soldiers and picaresque characters. His romantic comedies deal with more exalted people.

Naharro approved of the unity of action and divided his plays into 5 acts or 'stages,' each preceded by a prologue. He wrote best of plebeian folk, but aimed at making his personages consistent with the plot. This attempt at realism led him to the absurd length of making his foreign characters speak in their own language! But this was evidence of a serious literary purpose, and he did much to establish the comedy of intrigue.

Another writer of these early days was Gil Vicente who supplied plays for festive occasions at the Portuguese Court. The king's wife was Spanish and it was, perhaps, for that reason that some of his pieces were written in Spanish, others in Portuguese, and the rest in an artificial mixture of the two. The difference between the two languages is even now not very great. At that date it was considerably less marked, so that the hybrid result was less disconcerting than it sounds. Most of his plays were religious or pastoral, but he also wrote tragi-comedies, notably one on the subject of Amadis of Gaul, and all his pieces, though written for court performance, had the freshness of imagination and the popular flavour, so conspicuously absent from dramatic work on the other side of the Pyrenees.

Up to this time the Spanish drama comprised, in the main, religious plays, satirical or vulgar comedy and the dramatised novels of the type popularised by Encina. Actually the Church disapproved of secular

plays, which were often extremely lewd. In 1520 the Inquisition went to the length of forbidding their public performance, but the ban, which lasted fifty years, was never rigorously enforced.

Then, suddenly, the drama ceased to be a spectacle confined to palaces and churches and descended to the market-place. It became the most widespread form of literature, and the work of creating a popular and, in some sort, a national theatre was begun by Lope de Rueda.

He was born at Seville and brought up as a goldbeater. It is possible that he continued to work at his trade while also being an actor, author and manager of a company, for players were often under the necessity of supplementing their income. He died about 1565 and was buried, according to Cervantes, in the Cathedral at Cordoba. If so, the Church in Spain must have been very much more tolerant to actors than it was in France. The French player, unless he was fortunate in his priest, could only hope for Christian burial in consecrated ground, if he abjured his profession before his death. Even Molière was interred obscurely at night with the most meagre ceremony, whilst, in the next century, Voltaire was stirred to passionate indignation when the great actress, Adrienne Lecouvreur, was denied the rites of the Church and buried in a bit of waste land by the banks of the Seine.

Rueda took much from Italian novels, and one of his comedies is derived from a story by Bandello, which provided Shakespeare with the main theme of *Twelfth Night*. His *pasos*, or comic dialogues, contained humorous episodes in which figured the *bobo* or fool, destined to develop later into the characteristic comic type, known as the *gracioso*. It was by writing of this kind that Rueda did good service to the drama. He captured the national spirit and reproduced it in realistic sketches and dialogue, thereby increasing popular

appeal and making the public at large take an interest in the theatre.

Another native of Seville, a great centre of dramatic activity, was Juan de la Cueva. An educated man, he paid more attention to form than Rueda and divided his plays into 4 acts. Some of his pieces were on classical themes, others based on such comparatively recent events as the sack of Rome by the lawless mercenaries of the Constable de Bourbon. But the really significant fact was that he also found his material in the vast untapped sources of national medieval legend.

The *romance* was, and perhaps still is, the most popular form of Spanish poetry. It was easy to write passably well, since the odd lines were rhymeless and the even assonated, that is to say rhyming as to the vowels but not necessarily as to the consonants. The subject matter of these poems was very varied. Some were historical, like short *chansons de gestes* : others were romances of chivalry. Many dealt with folk-lore, mythology and the lives of highwaymen or smugglers, in the manner of the Robin Hood ballads. Others again were concerned with the struggle against the Moors and the epic reconquest of Spain. It was from a play by Guillén de Castro on this latter subject that Corneille derived the basic material for *Le Cid*. This great bulk of poetry that united to form the *Romancero* was a vast virgin field. Its use as a source went far to give to Spanish 17th century drama its distinctive national character.

Cervantes, so monumental a figure in the history of the novel, gave remarkably little to the drama. His plays were mostly youthful efforts and his only real contribution was to reduce the customary four acts to three, a practice which endured. It was Cueva, more than anyone else, who dominated this groping, experimental period in the development of the Spanish theatre. Early dramatic history in England and Spain was much alike. The similarity was increased by the sudden

emergence of a figure whose achievements dwarfed those both of his predecessors and of his contemporaries. In England Shakespeare: in Spain Lope de Vega.

Lope Felix de Vega Carpio, to give him his full name, was born at Madrid in 1562, the son of an embroiderer. Extremely precocious, he could read Latin at 5 and wrote his first play at the age of 12. He became a page and his master sent him to the University of Alcalá, where, in the intervals of riotous living, he acquired a good deal of learning. Then he fell in love with the daughter of an actor manager and, when she left him, wrote violent satires against her and her family. He was tried for criminal libel and banished from Castille for eight years.

In exile he was married by proxy to the daughter of a noble who was already threatening proceedings against him for her abduction. He outwitted justice by sailing with the Armada and found time during that disastrous enterprise to write a long pastoral poem, which he followed up on his return (rather tactlessly !) with an epic on the exploits of Drake. Meanwhile he continued his writing and, on the expiry of his sentence of exile, entered the service of the Duke of Alba. The death of his wife and son seemed to him a punishment for his misdeeds and in an access of remorse he became a priest. This was a mistake. He had no vocation for the Church and, once his grief was over, continued his dissolute life. Conduct pardonable in a layman was not so easily condoned in a cleric and there was a considerable outcry against him. But no criticisms could deprive him of the position his fame as a writer had won and a magnificent funeral was accorded him on his death in 1635.

Brave and pious, passionate and fickle, Lope lived many lives in one and the types of people appearing in his plays were as varied as his own experiences. They had to be, if his work was not to grow monotonous,

for his literary output was prodigious. Non-dramatic writings fill 21 volumes and his plays numbered over 1,800 of which more than 400 survive.

It follows inevitably that Lope was an improviser. But he was an improviser of genius. A play written, as some of these must have been, in 24 hours, could not contain memorable verse. But it was always fresh and the metre varied according to a regular system of his own. He used the eight syllable *romance* with alternate rhyme and assonance for explanations and narrative, *redondillas* (quatrains) for love-making, sonnets for soliloquies and *décimas* (ten lines of eight syllables) for laments. The result was often charming. It lacked the polish but also the monotony of the French Alexandrine. Lope's hastiness was as much a matter of temperament as of necessity. He wrote spontaneously, well aware that his work would not please the pedants or even the cultured. He had not invented the Spanish *comedia*. The theme and method dated from Rueda. But he brought to it his immense verve and vitality. What was commonplace before and after him was transformed by his unflagging imagination, his unfailing theatre-sense and his natural facility of style, into something approaching greatness.

Naturally there were serious blemishes—passages of unashamed padding, inexactitudes, vulgarity, a tendency to excel in scenes rather than in whole plays. It is rare, too, to find an entirely convincing, still less a completely virtuous character in his works. Except in a very few plays the people are superficial, but they have the merit of variety. They may figure in basically similar situations, but they are not mere repetitions of the same person. This is particularly true of the women. He certainly regards them as unscrupulous, but he puts them none the less on a pedestal. They are refined in manner and unexpected in action. The one characteristic common to them all is the readiness to sacrifice

everything for love: and passion, for Lope, justifies everything.

Still, he is not remembered as a creator of characters. He was not trying to produce immortal types. He was writing for a popular audience, for whom psychology, truth, style, deep emotion, careful structure were not the first essentials. They wanted plays with a stirring or ingenious plot. Lope supplied them.

His pieces were of widely differing type. One or two were on classical themes (*The Slave of Rome*), others were based on events in foreign countries (*The Duke of Muscovy*), while others again owed their origin to national history or legend.

A good example of this class is *El Mejor Alcalde El Rey* (*Justice belongs to the King*). In this a peasant asks his lord's consent to marry. Permission is given, but the noble, seeing the girl's unusual beauty, abducts her and right only finally prevails with the intervention of the king.

This play shows a unity of emotion and a truth of character uncommon in Lope's work. The peasant with his respect for his superiors and his sturdy independence is a touching and convincing figure who speaks from his heart. The piece is certainly a distortion of historical fact, but it expresses the spirit of the age in which the events were supposed to take place.

Many of Lope's plots were suggested by existing novels, though he was far from being a slavish adapter. Typical of these is *Punishment without Revenge*. Here a dissolute Duke is persuaded to marry the young daughter of the Duke of Mantua. While he is away at the wars, his wife falls in love with his natural son, Federico. Informed of their guilty relations, the Duke contrives to make his son slay the Duchess unwittingly and then has him put to death as her murderer. It is an ingenious plot, but the end, as so often with Lope, is weak. Federico's death does not seem altogether just, yet he

is not a sufficiently attractive figure for his fate to arouse much compassion.

It is in 'cloak and sword' plays that Lope shows himself at his best. The name was given rather loosely to plays with a complicated intrigue dealing with contemporary upper class manners. Certain ingredients are common to nearly all. The plots depend a good deal for their working out on mistaken identities, disguise, substitutions of one person for another, providential meetings of the long-lost and other devices, which, since Lope's work was pillaged right and left, became part of the stock-in-trade of comedies of intrigue all over Europe. Most of them, too, contained descriptions of familiar scenes or landscapes, passages of popular poetry and a parody, between two servants, of the main love-story.

The chief of these characteristics are to be found in *The Gardener's Dog*. In this play, something akin to *Twelfth Night*, the Countess Diana falls in love with Teodoro, her secretary. His love for one of her waiting women arouses her jealousy and also an aristocratic scorn of herself for deigning to love a commoner. These conflicting emotions lead her to encourage and rebuff him by turns and Teodoro's treatment of his own betrothed ranges comically from ardour to coldness in accordance with the Countess's varying attitude towards him.

Matters are in this state when two nobles, both aspirants for the Countess's hand, forget their enmity and plan the removal of their mutual rival. Teodoro has a servant, Tristan, the typical *gracioso*, who was to figure later as the confidential valet in Molière's plays and in hundreds of later comedies of intrigues. The two, unaware that he is the secretary's servant, hire him to assassinate Teodoro. The latter, told of his danger, implores the Countess to let him leave the Court. Tristan saves the situation by persuading an old Count that Teodoro is his long-lost son and therefore

worthy to marry the Countess. Teodoro tells her of this deception, but she, admiring his honesty, decides to marry him and keep the secret. The play is a charming one. Diana is witty and attractive. But she knows very well what she is doing. Her ostensible reason for not unmasking Teodoro was to spare the old Count grief and disillusionment: her real purpose to justify in the eyes of the world her marriage with her secretary. She was genuinely in love with him and Lope's women make short work of inconvenient scruples.

These plays required a frequent alteration of scene, for Lope was no upholder of the unities. This was contrived by changing the back-cloth and using only a few easily portable stage accessories. There were several theatrical companies, the smallest only comprising two actors. After 1600 the number of troupes rapidly increased and there were two properly equipped theatres in Madrid, open all the year round except during Lent and at certain festivals. Performances began at 4.0 in summer and at 2.0 in winter. There was a pit without seats, an amphitheatre on graded steps, and two galleries with, at the rear centre of the auditorium, a large box reserved for the women, known colloquially as the 'stew-pan'. Quaintly enough, the Mayor had a special box on the stage, which was the only roofed part of the house, the pit contenting itself with a canvas awning.

The audience had good value for their money. The performance began with a *loa* or prologue, generally having some relation to the main piece. In the two intervals between the acts of the chief item interludes of a farcical kind, still retaining the name of *entremés*, were given and the proceedings concluded with a short sketch, in which dancing was involved.

Lope neither tried nor claimed to be a great literary artist. His inspiration was popular and national. This made him the idol of Spain. It also prevented



him from being widely appreciated in other countries, despite the wholesale pillaging of his plots. Yet, had his output been less stupendous and more cosmopolitan in appeal the Spanish drama might have died without blossoming. As it was, Lope set his mark so thoroughly on the *comedia* that the form remained unchanged in essentials for nearly two centuries.

Lope's most famous follower was Gabriel Téllez, better known by his pen name of Tirso de Molina (1571-1648). He was a monk and, for a time, a missionary in the West Indies. Having returned to his native Madrid, he was forced to leave it again, as skits on certain persons introduced into his plays gave offence in high places. But he continued writing and, when he died as prior of a convent, he left behind some 400 plays of which 80 survive.

Some are historical, others religious. But the best are 'cloak and sword' pieces. Molina contributed nothing new. He was not so skilful as Lope at giving plausibility to his plot, but he was far better at portraying character. His *graciosos* are famous for their wit and he gave a predominant place to women, whom he represented as artful and coquettish. It was Molina who, in *The Seville Deceiver*, first dramatised the famous story of Don Juan and the Commander's statue. This tale went the round of Europe. It provided Mozart with the theme of his opera *Don Giovanni*. It figured in many poems and it was handled by various playwrights, by Molière in *Le Festin de Pierre*, by Shadwell in *The Libertine*, by Pushkin a hundred years ago in *The Guest of Stone* and, in our own time, by Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman*. It has even found its way onto the screen.

Another playwright of the age was the Mexican hunchback Juan Ruiz de Alarcón. He practised as a barrister for some years in his native country, but returned to Spain in 1614 where he divided his time

between writing plays and working in a government office. In private life he was quarrelsome, possibly because his deformity made him sensitive. As a dramatist he was remarkable for the care with which he wrote. He was more akin in this respect to the French classical writers than to the school of Lope. His output, as a result, was comparatively small, comprising only 30 plays. There was, too, a certain moral purpose behind his work. He placed character in the forefront and, by stressing a particular trait, made the events of his story follow logically from this outstanding characteristic.

This method was most successfully carried out in *La Verdad Sospechosa*, which provided Corneille with the substance of his only good comedy, *Le menteur*. The central figure is a truly magnificent liar. His inventions are as ingenious as they are unnecessary. Becoming more and more involved in his own gratuitous tissue of falsehood, he is finally driven into marrying the wrong lady. There is, therefore, an underlying moral. But Alarcón, who wrote with perfect taste and yet with apparent spontaneity, was too good a dramatist to over-emphasise the moral lesson. The play is essentially comic. Moreover, it is one of the very few comedies of the period that could appeal to a modern English audience.

There remains Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Unlike Lope de Vega, he was of noble birth. He was born in Madrid in 1600 and, after studying at the Universities of Alcalá and Salamanca, served for a while in the army. At the age of fifty he was ordained and thereafter, save for one or two pieces for Court performance, produced only religious plays.

They were mostly *autos*, that is one-act allegorical works, dealing with the mystery of transubstantiation and played on Corpus Christi day on movable platforms erected at the expense of the municipalities. Calderón

was not the originator of plays of this type. But he gave them their highest literary form and showed enormous skill in varying the same theme. The poetry, too, was exquisite. These pieces continued to be acted yearly until 1765. But they were costly to produce. There was a feeling that the nation had outgrown them and, at that date, their public performance was suppressed.

Calderón's secular plays were of much the same type as Lope's, but his historical ones had even less of history in them. Whatever the ostensible setting, the characters were really Spaniards of his own day. This is true even of the finest, *The Alcalde of Zalamea*, in which the local justice sturdily defies the king's authority and hangs the officer who has assaulted his daughter.

Some of his 'cloak and sword' plays are superior to Lope's. Outstanding is *La Dama duende* (*The Ghostly Lady*). Here a young widow, kept in seclusion by her brothers, steals into the room occupied by a guest and leaves notes for him, to which he replies, thereby initiating a love-affair which culminates after various vicissitudes in marriage. This play involves to some extent the 'point of honour'. In many of Calderón's hundred *comedias* it plays a leading part.

The word had a special significance. It amounted to a very touchy sentiment of conjugal honour, liable to be offended at the least breath of suspicion. It manifested itself in ferocious jealousy arising rather from threatened self-esteem than wounded love. It gave rise to vengeance of a refined cruelty, which was considered entirely justified. The primary purpose was to prevent the insult to honour being made public.

In Calderón's *Doctor of his own Honour*, for instance, a husband, suspecting his wife of infidelity, forces a surgeon to open her veins and gives out that she has

died owing to the slipping of a bandage following a normal medicinal bleeding. Actually she is innocent, but the husband shows no remorse and the spectators are expected to approve his conduct when he dips his hand in her blood, so as to wipe away the stain on his escutcheon. This is the situation in which Othello also found himself. But he suffered through injury to his love and, only secondarily, through affront to his honour. In comparison of the two Calderón's code seems strained and artificial.

The merit of these plays lies in the fertility of invention, particularly in the details of the plot. He used the same stage devices as Lope, but with greater ingenuity and deftness. He had a loftier conception of tragedy and his style was far superior. He wrote for a polite audience and the people he depicted belonged, for the most part, to his own social class. What he lacked was a genuine sense of humour and the 'common touch', that kinship with the people which made Lope so popular in Spain. Calderón was not, compared with his rival, a popular dramatist. His style was too cultured and his argument too refined. There was, also, a philosophic strain in him, best revealed in his most unusual and fantastic play, *Life is a Dream*. This is really a symbolic drama, showing that natural man is a wild beast only redeemed from his gross instincts by reason. The chief character, a prince brought up in a tower to be kept uncontaminated by men and then launched into a bewildering world, is really an embodied idea. But, though the characterisation is weak, the underlying philosophy has made the play far more widely known outside Spain than any other of Calderón's works, whilst in Spain itself almost every line has become a familiar quotation.

Calderón's plays lack the human and eternal qualities. His works give an exact picture, not of manners, but of the romantic ideals of the society in which he lived :

something also of the cruelty which seems inseparably present, with this power of idealisation, in the national genius. He was the representative of a code of ideas. His plays do not read well in translation, and the passing of the code for which he stood has robbed him in modern eyes of most of his interest.

Calderón was the last dramatist of note in Spain for many years. By his death in 1681 a period of decline had already set in. Spain lost nearly all her foreign possessions. Religion dwindled into mere formalism. The Universities waned in importance. The country was wretchedly poor, for Spaniards had looked to the New World for their wealth instead of developing their resources at home. All the arts, with the exception of painting, suffered eclipse. Playwrights surrendered their national heritage and turned to imitations of the French classical writers. With the accession of the French Bourbons this melancholy decline was accelerated, and it was not until the 19th century that Spanish drama shook itself free.

## CHAPTER VII

### MOLIÈRE

It is strange how little is often known about the greatest men. Experts are uncertain when Homer lived, and doubtful whether he was an individual or a sort of literary syndicate. Shakespeare's life is notoriously obscure. The chronological order of his plays is still not established beyond question and lack of biographical details has encouraged the growth of the most fantastic theories.

Molière has been somewhat better served. Contemporary doggerel chronicles make definite, if uncritical references to his plays, and the dates of production together with the box office receipts are preserved in the register kept by his fellow actor La Grange. Even so, rumour has been busy with his name. He has not suffered, like Shakespeare, the indignity of having his plays ascribed to somebody else. But the wildest statements have been circulated about his private life, and one absurd report identified him with the celebrated 'Man in the Iron Mask.' It would be as well, therefore, to make clear the outline of a career, which has been much blurred by ill-founded gossip and wilful misrepresentation.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was certainly baptised, and probably born, on Jan. 15th, 1622. When he was nine, his father, an upholsterer by trade, acquired by purchase from his elder brother the post of *tapisserieur du roi*, an office giving the holder access to the court, since he was responsible for the king's bed-furnishings

and appointments, and carrying with it the rank of *valet de chambre du roi*.

The next year, having been a widower rather less than a twelve-month, he married again. Imaginative biographers promptly assumed that Jean-Baptiste must have been ill-treated by his step-mother in the traditional fairy tale manner, since two or three women in that position are represented in a very unfavourable light in his plays. There is no evidence whatever to support this assertion. On the contrary, the existence of these characters is quite simply explained by a stage custom of the time. Actresses were not unnaturally reluctant to play the parts of elderly women. Such rôles were usually discharged in Molière's day by men. But he wanted to make use of the female members of his company. A young pair of lovers was generally essential to comedies and, by giving one of them a step-mother instead of a middle-aged parent, such a play as *Le Malade Imaginaire* was enabled to go forward without hurting the susceptibilities of his actresses.

It is sometimes thought that Molière was an uneducated man. Actually he was a far better scholar than many of those who thought themselves intellectually equipped to criticise his plays. His father was a man of substance and he sent him to the Jesuit College of Clermont, now the Lycée Louis le Grand. This was the best and most fashionable school in Paris, with 300 boarders and 2,000 day boys, to which latter category Molière belonged. He stayed there for five years, subsequently, in all probability, studying philosophy under Descartes' opponent Gassendi. When he was 15, his father obtained for him the succession of his official post and in 1642, the elder Poquelin being ill, Molière accompanied Louis XIII in that capacity on a journey to the south.

He also had some legal training, for he took a law

degree at Orléans. This does not mean that his knowledge of the subject was necessarily extensive, since the payment of the entrance fee was the most vital part of the examination. In any case, Molière had no intention of being either a lawyer or an upholsterer. He renounced his succession to the office, asked for the money bequeathed him by his mother and, at the age of 21, electrified his father by declaring that he proposed to become an actor.

Legend asserts that ever since seeing a play at the age of seven, Molière had cherished a secret ambition to go on the stage. In the same way a modern child may determine to be an engine-driver or a pantomime horse. This youthful resolution does not prevent him becoming a stockbroker or a solicitor when he grows up. No doubt Molière was fascinated by the theatre like other youngsters of his social position. There were several playhouses for him to frequent: the *Hôtel de Bourgogne*, the *Marais*, the scene of Corneille's successes, the Italian theatre where, as the play was given in a foreign tongue, he may well have learned much of his art of expressive gesture. There were, too, the outdoor players of the fairs and the Pont-Neuf. But some additional inducement was needed to make him give up a respectable and assured position to throw in his lot with people, of whom many were admittedly 'rogues and vagabonds', and all officially outside the pale of the Church. His father must have been as much taken aback by his decision as a modern parent would be, were his son to announce his intention of becoming a professional gangster.

The determining factor in Molière's resolve was a very simple one. The stage did greatly attract him. But he was even more attracted by a particular actress, Madeleine Béjart, four years his senior. A level-headed person, she doubtless regarded him, in the



first place, as no more than a stage-struck young *bourgeois*, whose money would be decidedly useful in launching a theatrical enterprise. Later she returned his love and, being as understanding as she was capable, proved of the greatest assistance to him.

She joined forces with him, and the newly-formed company, grandiloquently named the *Illustre Théâtre*, opened in a converted tennis-court. Successful for a month or two, the venture ultimately failed lamentably. One reason was the existence of other and better companies. Another the bitter hostility of the parish priest who did his best to discourage attendance.

The name of Poquelin had given way to Molière out of deference to family feelings, but the upholsterer behaved with generosity and good sense. He must have hoped that the failure would mean his son's return to a more honourable calling. Still, as soon as Molière, legally responsible for the troupe, was gaoled for debt, he came to the rescue, bailed him out and provided sums, totalling not far short of 2,000 livres, which, in more prosperous times, were duly repaid.

But Molière was determined not to give in. Paris had ignored him. There were still the provinces and, in 1645, not long after his release, he left the capital. It was not an easy life. Permission to act had to be obtained from local mayors and, if food was short, or the players had come from a town where plague was raging, they were likely to be sent on their way. Sometimes they were lucky enough to be hired to give entertainments during the annual meetings of provincial governments, but for the most part they were continually on the move.

Still, these years were of great value to Molière. He gained in experience. He excelled in comic parts, but longed to be a success in tragedy. This was

natural. An actor could only attain real renown by creating a tragic rôle, since that was the only form of dramatic work that was highly thought of. Even Corneille's *Le Menteur* and Racine's *Les Plaideurs* were only written as a relaxation from more serious composition. The great comedies did not yet exist. It was Molière who was to write them.

He had not so far found his feet. Two original plays, *L'Étourdi* and *Le Dépit Amoureux*, show ingenuity and ease, but they are highly improbable and there is nothing very distinctive about them. He was learning much, however. He came to understand the psychology of an audience, to see what made men laugh, to note their reactions to emotion. And so, when at last, the players decided to try their luck once more in Paris, he returned as an experienced actor and with a trained and observant eye.

The patronage of the king's brother was secured and, in 1658 Molière's company acted in the old guard-room of the Louvre before the seventeen-year-old Louis XIV and beneath the watchful, half-contemptuous scrutiny of the rival players of the *Hôtel de Bourgogne*. It must have been a fearful ordeal. A second failure would have meant return to the provinces for good and an end to all the slowly growing hopes of the past twelve years. And, at first, success hung in the balance.

The play chosen was Corneille's tragedy *Nicomède*. Molière had very definite ideas about acting. He held that, though the characters in a tragedy were kings and queens, they were none the less men and women. Their diction, therefore, should be that of people in real life. This view, undeniably correct in comedy, was less certainly justified in French tragedy, the style and nature of which seem to call for something of the grand manner. At all events the audience was not used to it. The reception was tepid and the

situation was only saved by the presentation of Molière's now vanished farce *Le Docteur Amoureux*. This proved far more acceptable to the young king than Corneille's rather turgid tragedy and he gave the company leave to share the *Petit-Bourbon* theatre with the Italian players.

When this building was pulled down to make way for improvements to the Louvre, Molière's troupe moved to Richelieu's theatre in the Palais Royal, where they remained until after his death in 1673. They subsequently amalgamated with the actors of the *Hôtel de Bourgogne* and so formed the company which, housed in different buildings at various times, has preserved throughout the historic name of the *Comédie Française*.

Though now settled in Paris, Molière had still to gain the public support. He could not hope to rival the old-established *Hôtel de Bourgogne* in tragedy. Comedy, he found, was excellently received. But the material available was poor. He himself, however, was increasingly conscious of his own abilities as a playwright. So, just a year after his return to Paris, he produced a one-act comedy in prose, *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, which not only attracted the public but taught him his true medium of dramatic expression.

As in most of his pieces, the plot was slight. Observance of the unities made this necessary. His own inclination also lay the same way, for he regarded incident chiefly as a means of revealing character. This play shows merely the discomfiture of two provincial coquettes. Having absorbed, but carried to excess certain ideas of the salons, they recoil in disgust from the blunt proposals of marriage made them by two nobles. Their suitors, determined to have their revenge, disguise their valets as noblemen and bid them pay their addresses to the absurdly affected misses. When the joke has gone far enough

they expose the deception practised upon them. The result is a highly amusing caricature of polite society. The valets' clothes are a parody of fashionable dress, their language an absurd exaggeration of prevailing diction. They pay ridiculous compliments and show a thoroughly trivial attitude towards literature, whilst the girls' notions of marriage and courtship are derived from the flimsy and insipid romances of the day, by which love was reduced to a complicated code of *galanterie*. This aspect Molière treated later with greater seriousness in *Les Femmes Savantes*, in which he portrayed a woman so enamoured of book-learning that she imperils her home, neglects her husband and tries to force her daughter into marriage with a smooth-tongued, fortune-hunting poet.

Molière was anxious to enlist the support of fashionable society and he had carefully stressed the point that his *précieuses* were only ridiculous by reason of their exaggeration of polite manners. Nevertheless the play did offend someone of note and performances were suspended for a fortnight. So, with his next piece, *Sganarelle*, an amusing sketch of a needlessly jealous husband torn between regard for his honour and physical cowardice, Molière abandoned social satire for farcial comedy.

In a more important play, *L'École des Maris*, suggested by a comedy of Terence, he advanced a further stage and produced social comedy, based on observation and with an underlying moral purpose: a play which could amuse thinking and intelligent people. Rival systems of upbringing furnish the theme.

Sganarelle, who figures with varying characteristics in many of Molière's pieces, is here a stern guardian of his ward Isabelle, whilst his brother, trusting his own charge, allows her the greatest freedom. A young man falls in love with Isabelle and tries to scrape acquaintance with Sganarelle who rebuffs him. In

desperation, the girl writes to him herself asking his help, and gives the note to her guardian, requesting him to return it to the young man, who she pretends has sent it to her. In this way Sganarelle is made an unwitting dupe and plays an active but unconscious part in effecting the marriage he is trying to prevent. In the process he emerges not only as a laughable figure, but, for the first time in French comedy, as a complete character.

Molière returned to this theme in *L'École des Femmes*. But this play was more ambitious. Comprising a full 5 acts in verse, it was a challenge to the supremacy of tragedy. Again the plot is simple. The central figure Arnolphe, intending to marry his ward Agnès, has brought her up in complete ignorance of the world. During his absence on a visit she has innocently received the advances of Horace. As Arnolphe has recently changed his name, this young man, improbably enough, never guesses that he is the girl's churlish guardian and confides in him, even to the extent of disclosing his plans for eloping with her. Arnolphe is unable to prevent the execution of the scheme, but Horace then plays into his hands by entrusting the girl to his care. Arnolphe pleads with Agnès. He cannot understand the change in her. His system has unaccountably failed. His love for her, though warped, is sincere and, for a moment, he is, like Shylock, almost a tragic figure. But when he tries to enforce his rights and a happy ending is only attained by the unexpected revelation that she is not really his ward at all, he forfeits our sympathy.

This providential *dénouement* is undoubtedly weak. But it was acceptable in Molière's day and he cannot be condemned for not employing the technique of modern drawing-room comedy, in which each exit or entrance is justified or explained. Moreover, to lead up to a convincing ending would have meant

elaborating his plot, and his whole aim was to be sparing of incident in order to concentrate his attention on the portrayal of character.

The play was enormously successful, but it did not pass without criticism. Certain *précieuses*, smarting from previous taunts, declared that some passages were shocking. In point of fact Molière's regard for decency was distinctly above that of the majority of his contemporaries. Fops, who had likewise suffered at his hands, affirmed that a play which pleased the pit must necessarily be bad. Other playwrights, jealous of Molière's success, declared that the piece lacked action, offended against the rules and was in all points inferior to tragedy.

Molière was nettled. But he was no longer a diffident beginner. His favour both with the public theatres and at court was growing. So, in the highly amusing *Critique de l'École des Femmes*, where in the course of a conversation before dinner these various criticisms were put forward, he duly demolished them with wit and good-humour through the mouth of a man of common sense.

Apart from being a most effective rejoinder to his opponents, this little piece is important as an expression of Molière's own views. Rules, he maintained, were meant to help and not to hinder. Furthermore, they must give way to the only one that really matters, the duty of the playwright to please. A man might be ridiculous in some ways and perfectly sensible in others, and it was the business of comedy to represent the foibles of men. In other words human nature with its contradictions, its baseness and nobility, its wisdom and its folly was the playwright's lawful field. From that course, save in some of his lightest farces and in comedy ballets for court performance, he was never to deviate.

There are few personal allusions in Molière's plays.

The idea that in *L'École des Femmes* the relations between Arnolphe and Agnès were a reflection of those of himself and Armande Béjart is absurd. For one thing there is no evidence that his marriage at that date was unhappy. For another, had it been so, Molière, with many malicious eyes upon him, would never have given his enemies so gratuitous an opportunity of gloating over him.

Nevertheless, though he avoided such a blunder, he could not silence calumny as he had quelled adverse criticism. Poisonous tongues and, loudest among them, that of Montfleury of the *Hôtel de Bourgogne*, whispered that Armande was not the younger sister but the daughter of Madeleine, and that Molière, in marrying her, had been guilty of the loathsome vice of incest. The king did his best to disprove the rumour by standing god-father to Molière's child, but the ugly story persisted. Even now, it is not possible to disprove it beyond all doubt. It is just conceivable that Armande was an illegitimate daughter of Madeleine by a certain Chevalier de Modène. It is far more likely that she was her sister. In any case she was no child of Molière's. The unhappiness of the union, however, is undeniable. There is no reliable proof that Armande was guilty of actual infidelity. But she was young, more than twenty years junior to her husband, and her temperament was utterly different from that of Molière, *le contemplateur*.

They drifted further and further apart and, though there was a reconciliation before his death, for long the two met only in the theatre and the necessity of rehearsing and acting love scenes with her must have been inexpressibly painful to him.

He had other causes for anxiety as well. Molière was no fanatic and he recognised his dependence on public good will. He mocked at the ignorance, pomposity and arrogance of doctors with impunity, because

the pedant of any kind was a familiar comic type. He laughed, too, with comparative safety at literary and social affectations, because certain salons were already something of a laughing stock. In the same way, before he decided to add the religious hypocrite to his gallery of portraits, he waited until the king had dissolved the Company of the Holy Sacrament. This organisation had done much splendid work, but it also descended to what was virtually espionage. Molière attacked many things light-heartedly enough. But about this particular subject he felt deeply, though he never forgot that his rôle was to amuse and, if possible, to cure by ridicule. He had suffered much from religious intolerance and at any moment the hostility of the Church might deprive him and his fellows of their livelihood.

So, with this powerful body dispersed, he thought it safe to go forward. Even then he took great pains not to cause offence. The existing version of the play is different from the original draft, but it is clear that, from the first, *Tartuffe* was unmistakably an arch hypocrite and not a malicious satire of the truly devout. The Queen Mother, however, thought otherwise and the king was persuaded to forbid performance of the play. This was a blow to Molière's pride, as well as to his pocket, and a source of joy to his enemies. Not for five years was the ban lifted and by that time other troubles had descended on his shoulders.

He was wretchedly unhappy in his private life. He was financially prosperous, but he felt that the position which should rightfully be his was denied him. The doors of the French Academy, which would have opened to admit Molière, the playwright, were closed against Molière, the comedian. His health, too, was failing. A serious illness left him with a chronic cough and the king gave him no rest. Ever since the performance of *Les Fâcheux* (*The Bores*),

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a series of short satirical portraits, he had been called on to contribute to court entertainments or festivities at Versailles. This was gratifying enough, but it meant working at high pressure. One piece was written, rehearsed and acted within a fortnight, whilst another, begun in verse, had to be completed in prose. The king and his court were fond of dancing, and in many of these 'command' pieces Molière introduced ballets. But whereas before, the ballet had been merely an interlude, with Molière it was ingeniously worked into the play itself. This device reached its full development in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, in which a citizen is so besotted with the idea of nobility that his daughter's marriage to the man of her choice is only contrived by passing her lover off as an Eastern potentate, and promoting the father in a ridiculous ceremony to exalted rank in his fictitious kingdom.

His friends, and Boileau in particular, constantly urged Molière to consider his health and give up acting. These pleas were renewed before the fourth performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire*. But Molière persisted in appearing, saying that 50 men looked to him for their livelihood, and there was tragic irony in the fact that the hypochondriac, whose conduct roused the audience to paroxysms of laughter, was a mortally sick man. With great difficulty Molière completed his performance. Then he collapsed and was taken home where he died the same evening (February 17th, 1673) in the arms of two Sisters of Charity to whom he had given shelter.

Molière brought back the theatre from the extraordinary to the natural and the real. With the exception of *Le Festin de Pierre* no play contains any important incident outside the scope of ordinary human experience. Behind most of his plays there was a moral truth, though it was never made unduly prominent. He was pleading for moderation and

good sense. Excess in every form, whether of virtue or of vice, was wrong. The prude was equally at fault with the libertine and, as such, fair game for the writer of comedy. He indulged in no flights of fancy, sought for no escape to a romantic world. He looked about him and saw people appraising things by a false standard of values. He combined in himself fundamental good sense and creative imagination. He was no embittered cynic. He was genial, not acid, and every form of humour was at his command from the broadest of farce to the purest intellectual comedy. He can make us laugh at affectation or stupidity. We smile at his charming and perfectly natural lovers' quarrels, yet he can stir us to deeper emotion.

His method was to take one particular characteristic and exaggerate it slightly, but not to the point of caricature. Then he would place his central figure in such circumstances as to bring this outstanding characteristic into play. *Tartuffe*, the sinister hypocrite, has successfully fooled the master of the house, but his lustfulness leads him to try and seduce the wife, the one action that could undo his work and open his dupe's eyes. And he cannot resist it. *Alceste*, the misanthrope, carries the virtue of sincerity to excess, but cannot prevent himself from falling in love with an accomplished coquette. *Harpagon*, the miser, for all his caution and avarice, shows an inclination for a woman whom he knows very well will prove expensive. It is by thus hitting unerringly on the weak spot that Molière makes his characters both human and so richly comic. And beside these great ones are dozens of deftly sketched and realistic lesser portraits.

Characters, conceived in such a way, are apt to be mere types. Molière's figures certainly are types, but he manages in some extraordinary way to make them individuals as well. *Alceste*, the best known

of all, is complex. He is no two dimensional figure, but a complete rounded portrait, who can be viewed variously as a snob, a prig, a bore or a tragic personage. Furthermore, he illustrates the truth that over-sincerity cuts a man off from ordinary lawful pleasures, just as Argan's conviction that he is ill makes it impossible for him to enjoy life.

Molière set the fashion for French comic writers after him, but his influence extended far beyond his own country. As a dramatist he ranks next to Shakespeare. Accuracy of observation, sincerity of purpose, facility of style, abundance of wit, deep humanity and solid good sense were his greatest gifts. He wrote for his own age, but his appeal is universal.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE RESTORATION DRAMA

EVEN before the Restoration the Commonwealth persecution of the theatres had ceased. *The Cockpit* and several minor playhouses reopened and Charles II recognised them on his return. But he went further. A keen patron of the stage, he granted Royal patents for the establishment of two theatres, one to Thomas Killigrew whose company was to be known as 'His Majesty's Servants': the other to Sir William Davenant, whose players took the name of 'His Royal Highness's Servants.'

Killigrew's theatre in Clare Market was opened in 1660. Twelve years later it was burned down and another, designed by Sir Christopher Wren, inaugurated in 1674 the famous succession of *Drury Lane Theatres*. After the fire the company moved temporarily to Lincoln's Inn Fields, Davenant's players having vacated their playhouse there for a more sumptuous building in Dorset Garden. Three years before the king's death the two companies united under Betterton, the son of Charles' I cook and the best known actor between the time of Burbage and that of Garrick.

Killigrew (1611-1682) and Davenant (1605-1668) were the founders of the modern stage. It was the latter who instituted the picture-frame principle, but with an oval apron projecting some distance in front. Killigrew copied this arrangement and also moved the orchestra, originally placed at one side, to its present position in front of the stage. As the musicians were

not numerous enough to cover the whole width, there was a vacant space, which came to be known as "Fops' corner," since it was generally occupied by young bucks, who for long made themselves an unmitigated nuisance.

The Italians had been the first to use painted scenery and Inigo Jones had copied their methods for his Court masques. Davenant, in France during the Commonwealth, was familiar with scenic devices there and he quickly introduced spectacular effects. One result of this was the production of musical plays, sometimes grand opera such as *Dido and Æneas* with music by Purcell and libretto by Nahum Tate, sometimes musical adaptations of Shakespeare who, by this means, was rendered more palatable to a public reared on Beaumont and Fletcher.

Davenant was generally the initiator, but it was actually Killigrew who, copying the French practice, first made the far-reaching change of substituting women for the youths who had previously played feminine parts on the English stage. The first actress to appear before the public was a Mrs. Marshall, who played Desdemona as early in the reign as December, 1660. In February of the next year, Pepys saw a woman take the chief rôle in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Scornful Lady* and remarked characteristically: 'This makes the play much better than ever it did to me!'

No one would quarrel with this opinion. Certainly Charles II did not. Two of his favourites, Nell Gwynn and Moll Davies, were at one time both ornaments of the public theatre, which the king was the first English monarch to frequent.

Elizabeth had been more interested in music than in the theatre. Charles II was an ardent play-goer and the audience of his day naturally consisted largely of the Court element. The drama became the most

popular form of literature. Any play which was not an abject failure was printed and provided the light reading that the novel does to-day. The theatre was a meeting place as much as a play-house. The practice of admitting spectators free to the boxes for one act, and only charging them if they decided to remain, encouraged people to drop in there to gossip and, since they moved from box to box, it was often impossible for the 'gatherer' to know whether they had paid or not.

It would be a mistake to imagine that the general public was not represented in Restoration audiences. A glance at the list of plays produced makes it clear that the characteristic comedy of the period formed a very small fraction of the theatrical output. Comedies of intrigue and heroic tragedies were immensely popular and far more highly thought of by the public at large than Restoration comedy.

Nevertheless, many of the audience were more sophisticated than in the preceding age. But it was a limited public. Consequently, though a play might be revived, an initial run of more than six or seven performances was very rare. As the custom was to give the author the takings of every third night, less certain costs, no dramatist could hope to make a fortune, especially when, owing to the interest of the king and court, he had often to compete with the gentleman playwright. Dryden never made more than £100 from any play and usually the sum was very much smaller;

The returned aristocrats, like many people in our own post-war day, were disillusioned and oppressed by a feeling of insecurity. This accounts to a great extent for the cynicism, the satirical tone and the absence of sentiment, characteristic of much of the literature of the time.

But sentiment, in some form or other, is almost

essential to humanity. Out of place in fashionable realistic comedy, it found a vent in that artificial style of play, known as heroic tragedy, in which love, honour and heroism were extremely exaggerated.

Davenant, once again, was an innovator in producing such plays. But he was not their inventor. Exile had familiarised the Royalists with the works of Corneille. Pure classical tragedy, however, is alien to the national temperament of this country. Corneille was too cold, too much lacking in action to appeal to an English audience. But there was another form of French literature which was enormously popular: the courtly and insipid romances at which Molière had laughed. The heroic couplet, whose vogue lasted for fifteen years, was the English equivalent of the Alexandrine, and Restoration heroic drama was derived from a mixture of Cornelian tragedy and French romance.

The Earl of Orrery with *The General* and Sir Robert Howard with *The Vestal Virgin* (a play with alternative endings, one happy, the other blood-thirsty), were the first real exponents of this type of drama. Dryden (1631-1700), now remembered chiefly as a satirist, was famous in his day primarily as the author of *The Conquest of Granada* and other tragedies of the same kind. This was an immensely long play with all the inherent defects of its hybrid species. The men are boastful tyrants or long-suffering martyrs, the women outrageously wicked or annoyingly virtuous. There is abundance of sensational and sentimental action, much moral reflection and rhetoric. But all is false and only the versification makes the play tolerable.

A far better piece was his blank verse tragedy *All for Love*. It is on the same theme as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, but the treatment is entirely different. The unities are preserved, though deeds of violence take place on the stage, and there are only

a dozen characters in all. Ventidius appears as the typical loyal Roman, Cleopatra as the perfect tragedy queen, to whom Antony's neglected almost offensively chaste wife makes an effective foil. Shakespeare's play arouses regret that such a couple should end so ignominiously. With Dryden the feeling is one of admiration for them. It is a play of rhetoric rather than of passion, more a sentimental melodrama than a pure tragedy. But it is admirably done.

John Crowne wrote plays of a lurid kind, but he also adapted Racine's *Andromaque*, and it was Racine rather than Corneille who influenced the second and better generation of Restoration tragic writers. With Lee and Otway, the falseness and exaggeration of Dryden's heroic dramas gave way to something resembling the truth to life of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

Lee reverted, before Dryden, to blank verse. He was a dissolute character who spent four years in Bedlam, though it was more likely alcoholism than lunacy from which he suffered. Still, wastrel though he was, he managed to infuse some measure of reality into the artificial heroic tragedy. In *Sophonisba*, for instance, Hannibal, bereft of Rosalinda who has disguised herself as a man and been killed in battle, sets about retrieving his fortunes and avenging her death. In a Dryden play he would have committed suicide after having proclaimed his despair in sonorous and perfectly phrased periods.

Otway's work is still better. He avoided sentimentality and bombast and could bring a play to a close without leaving the stage strewn with corpses. There is real passion and pathos in *Venice Preserved*. In this play Jaffier, unable to support his wife Belvidera, is persuaded by his friend Pierse to join a conspiracy. Having pledged himself to secrecy, he learns to his horror that the plotters contemplate nothing less than the slaughter of the City rulers, his wife's father among them. Moved by her entreaties, he reveals the scheme, but the Senators,



breaking their promise of pardon, put the conspirators to torture. Jaffier, scorned by Pierse as a traitor, wins his forgiveness by giving him a merciful death and then takes his own life. Otway so far bows to the taste for sentiment as to make Belvidera die of grief, but this is a minor blemish. Jaffier is not the conventional hero, but an innocent idealist admirably contrasted with the disillusioned Pierse, and the whole play is at once a plea for justice and a satire on humanity.

Otway was not content to arouse admiration and pity alone. Side by side with the main theme, he showed the depraved and senile affection of Antonio, probably a caricature of the Earl of Shaftesbury, for the courtesan Aquilina who despised him. This same feeling that something more than love was needed is apparent in Thomas Sothorne's *Oroonoko*. Here beside the story of the 'noble savage,' who kills his wife to save her from dishonour, is an episode, drawn straight from Restoration comedy, in which two sisters disguise themselves as men and set about acquiring husbands in the most mercenary and unscrupulous manner.

The final stage was the relegation of the love element to the second place. There is a love story in Addison's *Cato* (1713), but it is incidental. The primary interest lies in Cato's championship of Roman liberty against the dictatorship of Caesar. Cato is a hero, but he is a moral not a passionate one.

The truth is that heroic drama, ridiculed as early as 1671 by the Duke of Buckingham in *The Rehearsal*, was founded on a false idea both of reality and of what was tragic. Nicholas Rowe's *Fair Penitent*, for instance, in which Lothario makes his appearance, fails to arouse any deeper feeling than irritation, because it is impossible to believe either in the heroine, whose seduction brings about the tragedy, or in the lover who dies of grief. It is a Shakespearean theme, but wholly lacking in tragic inevitability. Although the situations are strong, the

people, psychologically, do not exist. Fortunately, lifelessness was only confined to tragedy. Characteristic Restoration comedy is of superb quality and of a kind unique in our theatrical history.

Restoration society was cynical, disillusioned and free from sentiment. Men were eager for pleasure. They were also profoundly curious about everyday life and anxious to establish human relationships on a rational basis. Taking a realistic as opposed to a romantic view, they distinguished between affection and carnal desire and considered the fusion of the two impossible. Man was naturally licentious and the taking of a mistress ought not, to their way of thinking, to interfere with married life.

The age was intelligent and the audience for this type of play consisted of the sophisticated few, who regarded tyrannous jealousy as absurd and a jealous husband as an essentially comic figure. Restoration comedy is not uplifting, but to regard it as wholly licentious is to take a hopelessly warped view. The trouble is that Lamb called it 'artificial comedy' and everyone accepted the label. Such a description is entirely inaccurate. Far from being artificial, Restoration comedy was purely realistic, because it devoted itself to studying and portraying contemporary society. Nor can it be called fundamentally immoral. The function of comedy is not to preach. It is rather, as Schlegel pointed out, to sharpen our powers of discrimination, to make us shrewder and to give us a knowledge of the world, so that we do not fall into trouble through ignorance.

Restoration comedy was bound to deal with sex. So is the literature of any age which attempts to discuss eternal problems and not to escape from them. The Restoration outlook was practical and the plays were not intended for babes and sucklings. Moreover, the men of the time were witty and talked flippantly as people do, whose position is not too secure. The

playwrights, belonging to, and writing for and of their own class, delighted in realistic details of clothes and mannerisms. They used the simpler language of their day rather than the elaborate metaphors of the Elizabethans. They owed nothing to Shakespeare, but a good deal to Jonson's satirical comedy of 'humours,' though their touch was less heavy. They were townsmen with a contempt for rusticity. They considered sex a matter both for jest and for thought, and they expressed their opinions with the utmost freedom. Were they privileged to witness many comedies, which pass without adverse comment to-day, they might well wonder with what justification they themselves had been stigmatised as immoral writers. The Restoration playwrights were sceptical and not over-virtuous. But they were intellectually honest.

The essential characteristics appear as early as 1664 in the first play of Sir George Etherege *Love in a Tub*. It is a mixture of farce and heroics with accurate comedy of manners, in which the sex antagonism of Sir Frederick Frolick and the widow is already typical of the Restoration attitude. In his second play, *She Would, if She Could*, there are no heroics, but two pairs of court ladies and gallants whose fragility contrasts markedly and incongruously with the robust figures of Sir Joshua Jolly and a boon companion. This lack of unity was the main cause of a failure, magnificently redeemed by *The Man of Mode* (1676) which is, of its kind, a great play. Dorimant is the faithless hero, so familiar in Restoration comedy and so unlike the conventional protagonist of contemporary heroic drama. Seeking a pretext to get free from Mrs. Loveit, he pretends jealousy of Sir Fopling Flutter and is so taken with Harriet that for the first time in his life he faces the prospect of marriage with equanimity. Few people in the play have decent moral standards. Medley, a caricature of Sir Charles Sedley, is a 'breathing lampoon,' whilst the discarded

Mrs. Loveit is a schemer well able to look after herself. Deliberate exclusion of sentiment allows the situations to be purely humorous.

Sir Fopling Flutter, ancestor of a long line, is a gorgeous creation. He has picked up French fashions and is forever displaying his polite accomplishments. The irresponsible Etherege does not disapprove of him. He does not allow him to be discomfited or turn him by exaggeration into a low-comedy figure. Sir Fopling is as much a source of pleasure to himself as to the spectators. Nobody quite like him could ever have existed and Etherege's work is not realistic, except in its faithful observation of externals. He was no thinker and no moralist. He saw life as an appearance and reproduced its outward aspect. His play was a careful picture of an artificial conception of life, painted without serious purpose but with immense artistry.

William Wycherley (1640-1716) is a much greater and more complex writer. Etherege was content to take life as he found it. Wycherley viewed it satirically. His own existence was not a happy one. His clandestine marriage with the Countess of Drogheda displeased the king and his wife proved so jealous, despite the rationalistic theories of the time, that she only allowed him to go to the tavern opposite their house, provided that he sat by an open window so that she could keep an eye on him. Later he spent seven years in the Fleet Prison as a debtor, only being released when the usually stingy James II. somewhat surprisingly paid off his creditors. Finally, on his death-bed he married a young woman and used her marriage portion to set up a young couple to whom he had taken a liking.

Wycherley's first plays, *Love in a Wood* in which Pepys' friend Mrs. Knipp appeared as Lady Flippant, and *The Gentleman Dancing Master*, the plot of which was taken from Calderón, are only remarkable for the brilliant dialogue. Very different is *The Plain Dealer*,

the story, though not the treatment of which comes straight from Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. Wycherley was not content to expose pretentiousness and cure foibles by good-humoured ridicule. He lacked the Frenchman's comfortable belief in the soundness of the middle course. He himself was torn between Puritanism, doubt and the animal lust for life. These feelings lent a savage touch of satire to his work. He attacked both the man of fashion and the fanatic and seemed to include himself in the denunciation as well. Molière's Alceste desired a better state of affairs. Wycherley's Manly appears to take a bitter delight in finding how bad things are. Alceste's fiancée was no more than a coquette. Manly's is a hypocrite who has married his best friend during his absence. Nearly all the characters are contemptible, every motive discreditable. The law is an extortionate instrument of injustice and friendship is mere deceit. The play is a piece of invective rather than a satire, an indictment of society by a discouraged cynic.

Yet in his last play, *The Country Wife*, Wycherley recovered his mental balance. Satire is still the dominant note, but one character at least shows that humanity is not hopelessly depraved. The plot again is borrowed from Molière, this time from *L'École des Femmes*, but with admixtures from Terence and Lope de Vega. There are no fewer than three plots. One concerns the reformed rake, Pinchwife who, having married a young wife, is determined to keep her in ignorance of town life. But she is not like Molière's Agnès. She is earthy, cunning and insatiably curious and responds at once to the advances made by Horner, whose action is dictated merely by the desire to annoy her husband. Next there is the affair of Pinchwife's sister Alithea who falls in love with Harcourt, but feels bound to remain engaged to the silly fop Sparkish who, far from being jealous, is gratified to find her an object of admiration.

Only when she discovers that he is no more than a fortune-hunter does she feel entitled to follow her own inclination. The third plot is provided by the cynical libertine Horner who, by spreading abroad a report that he is no longer in a condition to make love, enjoys the confidence of husbands and the persons of their wives. Into this figure Wycherley seems to have put all his hatred for the rake and, perhaps, his scorn of himself. The whole tone is bitter. The jealous Pinchwife is the dupe of his own jealousy. Husbands are shown the folly of trustfulness. The ignorant wife is seduced and the women are only afraid of being found out. But Alithea, virtuous though not prudish, indicates Wycherley's belief in something better. She points, in a word, to his reconciliation with life.

Wycherley is generally regarded first and foremost as a writer of witty dialogue, and secondly as a clever creator of character. But in this play he proves himself also a brilliant dramatist. The three plots are interwoven with such skill that they blend perfectly into a composite whole and lead up without the least irrelevance to the ultimate climax. Garrick omitted the Horner episode, but by so doing he mutilated a play which is a masterpiece of dramatic construction. And, played lightly, it need not create an offensive impression. Sparkling dialogue can atone for much.

Restoration comedy is unique and Congreve is a unique figure in its history. This claim is not justified either by his first play, *The Old Bachelor*, written when he was only twenty-three, or even by *The Double Dealer*, which followed it ten months later. It is triumphantly made good by his last and greatest play *The Way of the World*.

William Congreve (1670-1729) was too much of a thinker to adopt Etherege's easy attitude. Nor was he a misanthrope like Wycherley. He pitied rather than despised. He was sufficiently of his time to be able

to describe life realistically and to satirise fools and flighty women. Unlike the others, however, he was both a poet and a man of sensibility, who sought passionately at times for the finer side of life. Not content with what he saw about him he set off to a new and delightfully artificial world of his own devising.

This does not mean that all the characters of *The Way of the World* are fantastic. On the contrary the villainous Fainall and the crazily jealous Mrs. Marwood are figures of intense realism. But Millamant is compact of wit, caprice and fancy. Yet she is a recognisable person, endowed by the genius of her creator with an ethereal reality.

There are three elements in the plot. One, purely comic, arises from Mirabell's ruse in disguising his servant Waitwell as an aristocrat and instructing him to make love to Lady Wishfort, in order that his master may demand the hand of her niece Millamant as his price for not disclosing the ridiculous deception practised upon her. The second concerns the machinations of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood who discover this scheme and attempt to turn it to their own advantage. The third is the progress of the love affair between Millamant and Mirabell.

Congreve's supremacy lies in his perfection of style. It is by it that his characters live. We know no more about their background than we do of Racine's figures. That, however, is the only point in common. Whereas Racine's characters are real and tangible, Congreve's only exist in the moment of their appearance on the stage. They are, as Mr. F. W. Bateson has neatly put it, imprisoned in the dialogue. But the style illuminates the characters. Unlike Wilde, whose personages are uniformly brilliant, Congreve only gives to each the words proper to the individual character.

It is true that Congreve, though he can paint a portrait of manners, is not expert like Wycherley at handling a plot.

But he does not disgust us with his realism. Everything is in the best of taste. Yet it is not all fragility. There is feeling and depth in the bargaining dialogue between Mirabell and Millamant. Superficially flippant, the girl is really trying to make certain that her marriage will be a success and that she is not sacrificing her independence for nothing. This glimpse of reality is short-lived, for Congreve was refining upon, not depicting real life, and he did it exquisitely. There have been other stylists as polished and witty. But no one else has found the way into Congreve's world. It is his own delightful domain.

With Vanbrugh (1664-1726), the builder and manager of the Opera House in the Haymarket and the architect of the Duke of Marlborough's palace in Blenheim Park, there came a change. Sentiment, so long rampant in heroic tragedy, crept insidiously into comedy. For Congreve love was a contest of wits. For Vanbrugh it was a battle between desire and conscience. The unashamed view that marriage was a bond unworthy of respect gave way to a more sentimental, but more nauseating outlook. This is apparent in *The Relapse*, which was part farcical and part sentimental. It is still more evident in *The Provoked Wife*. The transition from the realistic was not complete. The brutal husband does not conveniently die and his wife and her lover are driven to illicit intrigue. But their behaviour is furtive not frank. There is no original satire or great power of characterisation in Vanbrugh, though he is always entertaining. With him comedy turned from the pure representation of manners to bourgeois drama with a strong tinge of sentimentality.

In the work of Farquhar (1678-1707), save for *The Beaux Stratagem* which is a reversion to the manners school, this tendency became more pronounced. Colley Cibber's *The Careless Husband* has a sentimental ending quite inappropriate to the supposed psychology of the



characters. With Mrs. Centlivre's *The Gamester* the full extent of the evil is apparent. In this play a lady, in order to cure her lover of his passion for gambling, disguises herself as a man and plays with him, winning everything from him including her portrait. He is abjectly penitent, she tenderly forgiving, and they live happily ever after.

This plot shows beyond all doubt the ruinous effect of misplaced sentimentality. Most people rightly prefer a pleasant to an unpleasant play. But there is one necessary condition, if the piece is to be taken seriously by a rational audience. The happy ending must not be attained by the total sacrifice of truth and probability both in event and in characterisation. *The Gamester* commits these enormities. Still more did the plays of Sir Richard Steele who used the stage as a pulpit. The characters are trite and unreal, the situations feeble.

Restoration comedy gave a brilliant picture of a frank, if vicious age. The writers lacked the spaciousness of Molière. They did not see the whole of life, but what they did see they saw very clearly. There was no trace of this in Steele. His work was sickly and ushered in a long period of banal sentimentality. *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) by George Colman and David Garrick was a not unworthy precursor to the welcome fleeting brilliance of Sheridan and Goldsmith. But there was little else. Thought was banished from the stage. The novel gained ground as the drama declined and, for the best part of a hundred years, the history of the English theatre makes dreary reading.

## CHAPTER IX

### FROM LESSING TO SCHILLER

FRENCH culture was pre-eminent in Europe during the first half of the 18th century. German dramatic writing consisted of tragedies in Alexandrines or pastorals as artificial as Dresden china shepherds. Authors sought to emulate Boileau and Racine and, since such a style was largely foreign to the national genius, fell short of their masters.

Gottsched was the leader of this pseudo-classical school. He laid down formulæ for correct writing, borrowed from France, and wrote dull plays to illustrate them. It was Klopstock who came to the rescue with a demand for the liberation of the imagination. His epic, *The Messiah*, is wearisome, but it stood for emancipation from classical rule and the assertion of German individualism. Some such movement was greatly needed. Patriotism and national self-respect had awoken with the rise of Prussia under Frederick the Great, but that monarch, progressive in politics, was a reactionary in literature. He despised his native tongue, spoke French in preference to it and invited Voltaire and other Frenchmen to his court in an endeavour to transform it into a second Versailles.

Gottsched was wholly at variance with Klopstock who opposed individualism and imagination to his pseudo-classicism and love of reason. Each was extreme and neither a really great writer. It was left for Lessing (1729-1781) a Saxon pastor's son, to find a truer course between the two and reconcile Sophocles with Shakespeare.

*Miss Sarah Sampson* (1755), his first important play, was not original, being largely derived from Lillo's popular *London Merchant or the History of George Barnwell*, written in 1731. It describes the seduction of the heroine by a libertine, his grudging consent to marry her and the poisoning of the girl by the rake's discarded mistress. It is written in prose and full of the high-flown sentiment and moralising speeches characteristic of innumerable plays of the time both in Germany and England. Lessing was feeling his way and shared the Frenchman Diderot's view that characters drawn from middle-class society were more appealing and truer to nature than the kings and princes of earlier tragedy.

The play marked the first attempt at German domestic drama and gave rise to an enormous quantity of banal imitations.

But Lessing was not satisfied and in *Minna von Barnhelm* he produced a drama of a really national kind, dealing with contemporary events. In it the Prussian soldier makes his *début* on the stage, in the person of a retired major, too proud to seek out his wealthy fiancée, who only overcomes his scruples by pretending to have lost her money. The quixotic officer, the rough, honest sergeant, the humorous but tender Minna and the sprightly maid are all pleasant and essentially German characters instead of foreign importations, and the whole play is an agreeable succession of touching and amusing scenes.

By 1772 Lessing had set down his dramatic theories in a series of weekly critical articles and he put them into practice in a five act prose tragedy, *Emilia Galotti*. The scene this time was laid in a small modern Italian principality ruled by an egotist, who drove his mistress almost mad with jealousy and kidnapped a young woman, whose father then killed her to save her from dishonour. The play is melodramatic, but redeemed from unreality

by the vividness of the characters. The plot was worked out logically and without digression and the piece had as much influence on tragedy as *Minna Von Barnhelm* exercised over comedy.

Up to now Lessing had written in prose. For the loftier theme of *Nathan the Wise* he used verse. In this play Nathan, a Jew, whose children have been killed by Christians, adopts a girl and brings her up as his daughter. A Knight Templar rescues her from fire and falls in love with her. She turns out to be his sister and the Sultan's niece. Thus Jew, Christian and Mohammedan are united by a family tie. The play is philosophical, a plea for tolerance voiced with dignity. But, though the people are partly allegorical, they are life-like and individual figures and the action arises naturally from the characters.

Lessing's plays are necessarily somewhat 'dated.' His dramatic criticisms remain amazingly fresh. Apart from commenting shrewdly on contemporary plays, he attacked the false classicism of the French, condemning the improbability caused by slavish observance of the unities of time and place. Tragedy, he held, should arouse pity as well as terror or admiration and gain its effect by representing the inevitable consequences of events brought about through the given character of the central figures. In this, he maintained, Shakespeare had been far more successful than Corneille or Voltaire. Lessing pinned his faith to common sense rather than formulæ in the cause of probability and dramatic effect. He advocated a condensed and not a fulsome style and pleaded for imaginative orderliness in preference to arid reason.

Lessing put forward criticisms of lasting value. But he was not strong enough to carry the day. Discontent with pseudo-classicism went to the extreme he had been anxious to avoid and the result was an orgy of unbridled sentimentality, of imagination run riot, the whole move-

ment taking the name of 'Storm and Stress' drama from the title of a play by Klinger.

Herder was the founder in Germany. At Strasbourg he met Goethe (1749-1832) and the two young men produced, with the help of others, a literary manifesto of a revolutionary kind. Goethe's play *Götz von Berlichingen*, was written in accordance with the principles laid down in it.

The setting is Germanic, but the piece is ill-digested Shakespeare. The cast is very large, including men of all ranks. There is no unity of interest or action and the scene changes frequently, rather as a protest against the unity of place than because the play demands it. In the third act, for instance, there are no fewer than twenty different scenes. The hero, a petty baron, clinging to his privileges of waging war on his neighbours, while preserving his allegiance to the Emperor, is represented as a chivalrous outlaw, a kind of Robin Hood, brought low by treachery. But both he and the villain are conventionally drawn and the whole work is really no more than narrative split up into scenes without any dramatic construction. Its effect, however, was immense and pseudo-Shakespearean plays multiplied. Sir Walter Scott translated the piece in 1799 and there is no doubt that it was largely under the influence of Goethe's play that he began with *Waverley* his long series of historical novels.

Schiller's first drama *The Robbers*, written in 1781, was likewise an attack on the old dramatic tradition. It substituted multiple action for the unities and prose for verse. The hero was of the same kind as Götz, a man forced by unnatural intrigues to become a robber and a murderer. The play is wildly improbable, the language bombastic and exaggerated, but Schiller, unlike Goethe, was a born dramatist with a feeling for the stage. He managed somehow, both in this and in *Intrigue and Love*, the tale of a pair of lovers ruined

by class prejudice, to hold the spectator's attention.

Many of these 'Storm and Stress' plays were direct attacks on the immorality and corruption of German princelings and their courts. The French Revolution was brewing. The American colonies were fighting for independence, and politics and literature, both opposed to the established order, were closely allied.

The movement continued, but something better developed alongside it. The sober restraining influence of Lessing survived. Kant's belief in the immortality of man, based partly on faith and partly on the God-given moral consciousness in man himself, interested many, and Goethe among them. He was growing more mature. He had been to Italy where he learned much, and in his next plays he showed that advance towards simplicity and a modernised form of classicism which made him and Schiller, in their Weimar period, the greatest literary figures in Europe.

The change is apparent in *Egmont*. Prose is still the medium and the play, like *Götz*, is a protest against tyranny, but it is highly dramatic instead of formless. The Shakespearean element has been properly absorbed. Dutch citizens are introduced for local colour, but also to reveal the feelings of the populace towards their Spanish oppressors. Through their mouths we learn of Egmont's championship of their liberties before we see him. When he does appear he is a noble and natural figure, who pleads for tolerance as a means of gaining the good-will of Spain, and there is great dramatic intensity in the circumstances of his arrest by the ruthless but not impossibly monstrous Alva. The attempts of the burgher's daughter, Clara, to rouse the crowd to rescue him are moving, and as unsuccessful as they would be in real life. There is not a false note in the play. She poisons herself and Egmont goes to the scaffold. Both events are tragic, but, though the pair die, they rise above death to the ultimate triumph.

There is the true conflict of wills to provide the action, and uplifting Christian ideas are grafted on to the cold, destiny-ridden tragedy of antiquity. German classicism was a masterly union of Greek perfection of form with an ennobling theme.

*Torquato Tasso* was a much quieter play, with no more violent action than Racine's *Bérénice*. The piece is in verse, has only five characters and describes the poet's secret love for a princess and his dismissal from court for declaring it. It is a penetrating study of a too introspective mind.

*Iphigenia in Tauris*, written in blank verse, marks the fullest developments of Goethe's classical style. The play shows Iphigenia as a captive priestess in the barbarous kingdom ruled by Troas. Hitherto she has prevailed upon him to suspend the savage custom of sacrificing any strangers cast upon the shore to Diana. But, angered by her refusal to marry him, he insists that the usage be observed when two Greeks reach the island. She recognises one as her brother Orestes and the other as his friend Pylades. They urge her to fly with them and she consents. Then, unwilling to deceive the king whom she respects, she scorns subterfuge and appeals to his better feelings. The play ends with Troas' consent to their departure.

This is an idealised Iphigenia who will not stoop to trickery. Her character is in accord with Goethe's conception of tragedy as an ennobling thing. There is no ornament. There is no love theme to speak of. Orestes and Pylades do not vie with one another in self-sacrifice, nor does the latter fall in love with Iphigenia. There is little incident and no tedious communing with confidants. The action takes place in the souls of natural but morally noble people, who struggle, not with outside forces, but with their own feelings. And victory leads them to self-denial instead of to disaster. It is a psychological drama, perhaps even an epic rather than a

stage play, for Goethe was more a poet than a dramatist. This is clearly apparent in *Faust*.

The first part was begun in Goethe's 'Storm and Stress' period with Faust as a romantic hero doomed to eternal damnation by his love for Marguerite. But his conception of the play gradually changed. He came to see Faust as a seeker after truth, faced with a philosophical, even a theological problem. An optimist, Goethe regarded evil as well as good as the work of the Creator, and Mephistopheles as a being whose function it was to will evil but, in spite of himself, to further good.

*Faust*, in other words began as a tragedy of individual emotions and ended as a universal tragedy of the human spirit, with the central figure defying Mephistopheles to make him so content with the world that he would renounce salvation in order to prolong the present. To such a grandiose scheme the episode of Marguerite could be no adequate finish and a second part was imperative. Goethe realised this, but not until the last year of his life did he complete it. We see Faust conjuring up Helen of Troy, for the amusement of the Emperor, and himself becoming a worshipper of ideal beauty. Even Greek culture, however, cannot satisfy him. He devotes himself to reforming all the arts of war and peace and at last creates a perfect society. He must needs rest content with this and desire the prolongation of the present. Mephistopheles therefore claims his soul, but angels intervene and a penitent, 'once called Marguerite,' intercedes for Faust at the feet of the Virgin. This then is not so much a play as an allegory. Goethe was not primarily a dramatist. He was a thinker and a poet.

Schiller (1759-1805) like Goethe was an idealist. He maintained that a good poet must also be a good man and strove to bridge the gulf between the world of poetry and real life. This desire, coupled with his



love for history, influenced him considerably in the choice of his dramatic subjects. He sympathised with the prevailing ideas of liberty. In an early and formless play, *Don Carlos*, he makes a noble deliver an impassioned appeal for toleration to the despotic Philip of Spain who, improbably enough, listens to it with respect. In the great *Wallenstein* trilogy he represents his hero as deserting the Imperialists and going over to the Swedes, because he thinks the Emperor's policy ruinous to Germany. It is a nationalist theme. The same plea for freedom against tyranny is expressed in a less strictly national guise both in *The Maid of Orleans* and in *Mary Stuart*.

The former play is a curious one, particularly to those familiar with Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan*. Schiller's conception of the heroine is quite different. He maintained that reform could only come from the hearts of men and not through politics. He represented Joan as a simple person, with the simplicity of the Greeks. Her childlike faith is the sole source of her power. But she falls in love with an English officer and at once becomes a mere woman without divine inspiration. So when her father accuses her of getting her power from the spirits of darkness and not from heaven, she is unable to reply and is turned out of the French forces as a witch. Made captive by the English, she overcomes her earthly love, breaks her chains and plunges into battle. Having turned victory into defeat, she is mortally wounded and dies surrounded by her countrymen who have now recognised the sacred source of her inspiration. There is nothing about her trial or condemnation and this lack, together with the unconvincing and sentimental nature of the love episode, robs the play of its main dramatic interest.

Schiller's sympathies were wholly with Joan. In *Mary Stuart* he attained to a high degree of impartiality. Though a Lutheran, he did not depict the Roman Catholics from a biased point of view. All the interest

centres on Mary and Elizabeth, and the masterly portrayal of these two makes this unquestionably his finest play.

We see Mary standing up boldly to Paulet, the Governor of Fotheringay, and refusing to recognise the tribunal which has tried her. His nephew, Mortimer, tells her privately that he is a Roman Catholic and has only treated her harshly the better to disarm suspicion and effect her rescue. Lord Burleigh desiring Mary's death for reasons of state, tries to persuade Paulet to assassinate her, so that the dangerous consequences of a public condemnation can be avoided, but the Governor sturdily refuses. Mortimer then goes to Elizabeth and, in a secret interview, promises that Mary shall be assassinated. Having thus thrown dust in the Queen's eyes, he seeks out Leicester and hands him a letter from Mary. The favourite reflects bitterly that he had once refused to wed her and now, after transferring his allegiance to Elizabeth, he has learned that the Queen plans to marry the Duke of Anjou.

Mortimer reveals his scheme, but Leicester is dismayed at the possible danger to himself and is with difficulty persuaded to entice the Queen to Fotheringay, where Mortimer's friends propose to hold her as a hostage for Mary's release. The interview between the two women takes place. Mary is terrified and at first humbles herself. But Elizabeth, vexed at finding her so beautiful, taunts her and her captive, reckless of the consequences, returns the abuse with interest. Elizabeth angrily departs and Mortimer breaks into an impassioned declaration of love to Mary who repulses him, recognising with horror the dread effects of her beauty. The plot against Elizabeth miscarries, but one of the conspirators has a French passport, which gives Burleigh an excuse for breaking off the proposed marriage with Anjou. Mary is found writing a letter to Leicester and the Earl only saves himself by betraying Mortimer. Even so Elizabeth,

mindful of the prisoner's beauty, is doubtful of Leicester's fidelity and tests it by ordering him to attend the execution. She signs the necessary document, but will not say definitely when the sentence is to be carried out, hoping that Mary may be assassinated meanwhile. Burleigh seizes the opportunity to have her beheaded at once. Then it is learned in London that Mary has been convicted on false evidence. Elizabeth grudgingly orders a re-trial and, when the news of her execution is brought, saves her face by discharging the official responsible.

It is a magnificent study of two women, with Mary infinitely the finer character. Human, even sinful, intensely feminine, always courageous, she is represented at the end as having triumphed over earthly desires, whilst Elizabeth is shown as a shrewd politician, vain, spiteful, but with a streak of undeniable greatness. The play is not historically accurate, particularly as regards Leicester. Nor is it so severely simple as the works of Goethe's later period. But there are no irrelevancies and the events are determined by the characters. Elizabeth's hesitancy is wonderfully portrayed and there are few better scenes in drama than the one between the two women.

Soon after Schiller's death the Romantic movement began. This was, in a sense, a continuation of 'Storm and Stress,' but it had certain special characteristics. The old disregard of form, the uncontrolled use of the imagination went on. In addition we have personal reflections introduced, descriptions of nature as indications of the hero's mood, and, above all, the cult of the medieval, caused in part by a natural tendency during the period of Napoleonic domination in Germany to see the past through rose-coloured spectacles and to compare it favourably with the unhappy present. There was, too, a wave of understandable pessimism resulting in a number of morbid 'fate-dramas,' in which a father

kills his child or a son his mother, not in the ironically inevitable manner of Greek tragedy, but by pure chance. The plays of Tieck, Kleist and Eichendorf are full of such episodes and the novels of the period are even more extravagant.

This movement was not confined to Germany. It manifested itself in Spain and England as well. Romanticism was to some extent natural to the national genius of England and of Germany, both of which shook off the classical yoke of France with comparative ease. It was so to speak a reversion to nature. In France, on the other hand, Romanticism meant a violent break with long established tradition. For that very reason the characteristics of the new movement showed up clearly by contrast with what had gone before. This is particularly true of the drama.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT IN FRANCE

THE reign of Louis XIV was a great age. Even before his death, however, the climax had been reached and the 18th century ushered in a long period of decline culminating in the overthrow of the monarchy. As early as 1709 Lesage's comedy of manners, *M. Turcaret*, exposed the corruption rife among the financiers. Beaumarchais, writing seventy years later, was far more emphatic. *Le Barbier de Séville* is as light-hearted as *The School for Scandal*, but *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784) is a caustic and virulent attack on the nobles and their privileges. The second quarter of the century had seen the graceful psychological plays of Marivaux who 'weighed nothings,' as Voltaire put it 'in scales of gossamer,' the characters living in a charmingly trivial world. And the real world about them was disquieting enough.

Wars of aggression had impoverished France and brought no lasting gain. Taxation was unfairly distributed and much of the proceeds went into the pockets of the tax-farmers instead of into the Treasury. The financial schemes of the Scotsman John Law proved as disastrous as the South Sea Bubble in England. As the century progressed overseas possessions in Canada and India were lost, while, at home, the old confidence and certainty gave way to doubt. Bossuet had written his history ascribing the march of events to the direct intervention of Providence in human affairs. Voltaire, essentially a representative of his age, found no explana-

tion of history and concluded that man managed as best he could. The nobility had become parasites, clustered about a king whose divine right was gradually being called in question. An increasing interest in science and economics was apparent. Things previously accepted without hesitation were subjected to enquiry, and reason triumphed more and more over tradition.

Yet for all this progressive spirit, the drama preserved the old forms. Crébillon wrote ferocious, declamatory tragedies inspiring terror. Voltaire, the arch enemy of superstition and priestcraft, an agnostic if not a complete sceptic, was yet a conservative in literature, just as he was at heart a monarchist, who would have hated the Revolution, whose leaders claimed him in the early stages as their champion. To-day he is remembered as a populariser of the ideas of his century and as an incomparable writer of witty philosophical tales. In his lifetime he was regarded as a great dramatist. Actually, beyond elaborating scenery and abolishing the nuisance of having spectators seated on the stage, he contributed nothing vital to the drama. His versification is faultless. His plots are as ingenious as the rules allowed them to be. But the characters are puppets skillfully manipulated. He did not consider love a sufficiently strong emotion to sustain a tragedy unaided and produced what was virtually sophisticated melodrama. The conventions exerted a strangle-hold on originality, so that almost every move open to the dramatist could be anticipated by the experienced play-goer. Tragedy, in consequence, became insincere and sterile.

But powerful influences were at work. Diderot denounced the unreality of French classical tragedy and advocated middle-class drama, though he was too unskilled a playwright to present his ideas in an effective form. The novel, however, was less cramped. As early as 1731 books appeared which forsook the cold and rational analysis of life for the portrayal of the

sufferings and yearnings of the human heart. Save in the Abbé Prévost's superb sentimental novel, *Manon Lescaut*, the psychology of these books was faulty. The sensibility of the characters was often no more than self-pity and their gloom without adequate cause. Nevertheless a new type of lover arose in fiction. Love was not exactly a passion, still less an amusement. It was shown rather as a tender feeling accompanied by a vague melancholy, contrasting sharply by its hopelessness with the refined sensuality of 18th century courtly amours.

The novels of Richardson, full of sentiment and pathos were translated. Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* provided a perfect type of kindly and essentially moral tale, whilst Gray's 'Elegy' afforded a classic example of melancholy reverie, though Macpherson's 'Ossian' found even more readers in France.

As the cult of classicism dwindled, the influence of England and Germany, hitherto negligible, became increasingly pronounced. Goethe's early novel *The Sorrows of Werther* introduced a forerunner of the Romantic hero and was widely read. English ideas of political liberty had already percolated into France through the writings of Voltaire and Montesquieu. Now the interest in English literature developed. Books were translated. Garrick acted Shakespeare in English and, although the plays were imperfectly understood, French adaptations were made and the imaginative vigorous spirit revealed in them made a considerable appeal.

These foreign influences hastened the advent of Romanticism. But, for a movement to take firm root in the literature of a country, it must be cultivated not only by foreigners, but by native writers, preferably by men of genius. It was not long before one was forthcoming in the person of Jean Jacques Rousseau. The Revolutionaries attached immense importance to his *Social Contract*. Later his influence was more literary

than political and depended chiefly on such works as *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). This book, written like Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* in letter form, is almost unreadable to-day. It is saturated with sentiment and enormously long. It describes how a young girl falls in love with her tutor. She succumbs momentarily to her passion, but, actuated by a sense of duty, repulses his further advances, marries a middle-aged man and eventually dies from an illness contracted while saving her infant son from drowning. There is, therefore, a moral conclusion. Nevertheless the book was a proclamation of the right of the individual to develop his or her own personality, instead of bowing to the conventions of society or paying the penalty, as in previous sentimental books, for defying them.

It is true that Rousseau did not found the school of analysis of feeling, but he made this purely subjective type of book immensely popular. Man is considered once again as an individual instead of as a social being, and lyrical impulses, stifled by the classical literary conventions, were released. Rousseau portrayed passion set in a framework of descriptions of nature. His pen-pictures were somewhat generalised. Detailed descriptions of exotic scenery made their appearance in Saint-Pierre's sentimental, idyllic love story *Paul et Virginie*.

Akin to Rousseau by her sensibility, though in no other respect, was the strong-minded Mme. de Stael. She incurred the enmity of Napoleon and spent much of her time during the 1st Empire in exile. Apart from two subjective novels, she wrote a book embodying the impressions made on her singularly acute mind during a stay in Germany. In this work she maintained that French authors were writing on conventional lines for the entertainment of a sophisticated public and only excelled in imitative work. The restricted life of society had destroyed their individuality. But in Germany literature was the product of reverie, mysticism and



philosophical reflection. She urged her countrymen to banish the unnatural cult of antiquity and to look for inspiration, not to pagan Greece and Rome, but to Christian Europe and the rich, colourful Middle Ages, which the men of the classical period had so consistently ignored.

Rousseau had already popularised sensibility and simple or savage life. Mme de Stael collected and summarised ideas previously ill-defined. Chateaubriand, appealing in his *Génie du Christianisme* to the emotions rather than to the intellect, used all the resources of his matchless style to show that religion was supremely attractive and moving. In *René*, a simple tale with a North American setting, he made a notable contribution to the romantic novel. Hitherto the troubles of characters in French fiction had been caused by the existence of some obstacle, such as convention or parental authority. But in *René* the man's sorrow was in himself. He was an idealist, seeking a perfection which he knew he could never attain and accordingly haunted by a spiritual woe. He is a strange, unbalanced creature, but psychologically convincing: far more so, in fact, than the numerous romantic heroes for whom he served as a pattern.

As yet there has been no word of the drama in this chapter. This is inevitable. The Romantic movement affected every form of literature. The drama was the last to feel its influence, for it had been the highest form of writing during the classical age and was consequently the most firmly rooted in tradition. Many books have been written on the nature and origin of Romanticism and many efforts made to define it. There is not much profit in either pursuit, for literary labels can only safely be applied to lesser writers. In the greatest, artistry bridges the gulf between the romantic and the realist, so that there is no fundamental difference.

Nevertheless in France there was a very large output of purely romantic writing compressed into a com-

paratively short space of time and in the narrow, as it were, sectarian sense of the word, some definition may be usefully attempted. In its widest aspect romanticism was international. The germs of it were already developing in France in a natural reaction against the outworn and rigid classical convention. The writings of Shakespeare, Byron and Walter Scott and the early works of Goethe and Schiller played a part in dictating the choice and treatment of subjects. Several of Shakespeare's plays and of Scott's novels were adapted for the French stage, before original work was attempted. But there were other and less admirable sources of inspiration. The novels of Ann Radcliffe and 'Monk' Lewis were translated and devoured, readers revelling in the descriptions of convents haunted by bleeding nuns and of mysterious castles perched on beetling crags in which unimaginable happenings took place. From this farrago of nonsense the Romantics never altogether freed themselves. They did their best to look like the interesting destiny-ridden heroes of their novels. They wore eccentric clothes, adopted picturesque names and in their contempt for the classical did not always choose the best of the Gothic.

Despite much that was silly and extravagant, particularly in the work of minor men, there was a serious underlying purpose, though the drama of the period was actually far less successful than the poetry. Lamartine came to the front as a poet, before Romantic drama had asserted itself. Dumas was actually the first to break through the doors of the state-subsidised theatres, but he was no stylist and Hugo (1802-1885) became the acknowledged leader of the movement. The lengthy preface of his unwieldy play *Cromwell* served as the literary manifesto of the new school.

Romanticism, as Hugo interpreted it, meant liberalism in literature. It was a reaction against Voltairean reason and materialism, and a defiance of the restrictions which

curbed a writer's ideas and prevented their free expression. It was a liberation of the imagination and an assertion of the author's right to treat of his own individual feelings, or of any subject he chose, in a personal or idealistic way, employing to that end the fullest resources of metre and vocabulary.

Romantic drama was opposed to French classical tragedy in almost every respect. It advocated the mingling of the comic with the tragic, of the sublime with the grotesque, since literature was intended to reflect the circumstances of real life. The subjects of 17th century tragedy had been taken almost without exception from antiquity. Two of Hugo's plays deal with events in English history and the scene of three others is laid in Spain at the time of the Inquisition. Two more purport to represent events in 16th century France, whilst the action of another passes in a medieval castle on the Rhine. The unities of time and place were nearly always defied and, whereas the personages of a Racinian tragedy had been few, Hugo's plays required a large cast, the characters in *Cromwell* being so many that the piece could never be performed. Violent actions took place in view of the audience instead of being reported, the speeches to confidants, a bane to classical tragedy, disappeared in favour of soliloquies. The classical dramatists had not worried about historical accuracy, but the Romantics delighted in local colour and splendid costume and pretended to reproduce history, though actually their interpretation of events was extremely arbitrary. They did away with all restrictions governing metre and the choice of words, they used either prose or verse in the manner of Shakespeare and searched for the richest and most fanciful metaphors.

Hugo's manifesto appeared in 1827. The same year witnessed the Shakespearean performances of Kemble's company. Alexandre Dumas was enormously impressed

by both. He had already written one or two vaudevilles and a piece on Christina of Sweden, which had not been staged. He now produced a Romantic play, *Henry III and his Court*, introducing astrologers and sliding panels and showing the revenge wreaked by the Duke of Guise on his wife's lover. The play was accepted by the *Comédie Française*, but the actors were doubtful about its chances of success, certain papers did not approve of the presentation of a French monarch in an uncomplimentary light and the forces of tradition were arrayed against it. Dumas had recourse to a desperate expedient, He sought out the Duke of Orléans, from whose employ, incidentally, he had been discharged, and persuaded that astonished dignitary not only to attend the opening performance, but to bring with him a brilliant assembly of diplomats and foreign princes who were dining with him. The play consequently was a huge success.

Two years later Dumas enjoyed his greatest dramatic triumph. There had been many serious plays on the theme of adultery, but none in a contemporary setting. His *Antony* showed a wife preferring death to the disgrace of being surprised in infidelity by her husband. The lover saves her honour by declaring that he had killed her as she would not respond to his passion. It was a strong situation with an unexpected ending, handled with what passed at the time for terrific realism, and the play had the unparalleled run of 130 nights. But Dumas was no stylist and some of his plays seemed naïve even to enthusiastic Romantics. It was left for Hugo to justify the cause of Romantic drama.

A regular battle raged between his gesticulating, vociferous supporters and the upholders of tradition during each of the 45 performances of *Hernani*. By the end of the run there was not a single line that had not been vigorously cheered or as viciously hissed. It is a good, full-blooded drama containing splendid verse, uttered by vivid, though unreal characters, and it demands

acceptance by the spectator of the Spanish code of honour. We see Doña Sol betrothed to her elderly guardian Don Gomez, but in love with the mysterious outlaw Hernani. His band is routed by the forces of the king and he takes refuge in the castle of the old noble who surprises him making love to Doña Sol. Before he can revenge himself, the Royal troops arrive to search for the fugitive, but Gomez braves the king's anger and refuses to surrender the man who, though his deadly foe, is protected by the sacred laws of hospitality. The king withdraws taking Doña Sol as a hostage. Gomez then challenges Hernani to a duel, but the latter explains that the king is really abducting the girl and the two set off in pursuit. Hernani swears that whenever his companion blows his horn he will surrender himself to him, to bear his punishment for having made love to Doña Sol. But, until the abduction is avenged, there shall be a truce between them.

The king, meanwhile, has been elected Emperor as Charles V and a sense of his responsibilities has led to a change of heart. So, discovering the plot against his life, he forgives his would-be murderers, reinstates Hernani in his rightful rank as a grandee of Spain and bestows upon him the hand of Doña Sol. The marriage takes place. But Gomez blows his fateful horn and Hernani, recalling his oath, does not attempt to defend himself. Both he and his bride take poison and the old noble, recognising the futility of his vengeance, kills himself in despair.

Other plays, *Marion Delorme*, *Le Roi s'amuse*, *Marie Tudor* and *Angelo* followed in quick succession. *Ruy Blas*, the story of a lackey forced by his master to pass himself off as a grandee and make love to the queen, who has scorned the noble, is Hugo's best play. There is real pathos in the situation when the lackey, who has really fallen in love with the queen, kills himself to save her from calumny and dies happy in the knowledge of her

forgiveness. *Les Burgraves*, on the other hand, written in 1843, was deservedly a failure. It contains all the worst qualities of Romantic drama. There is a fantastic episode of Barbarossa returning from the grave to rebuke his degenerate descendants. There is a young man bound by an oath to kill his host, who turns out to be his long-lost father, and the whole play contains coincidences and forced situations, staged so as to bring about an effective contrast of good and evil. Hugo's plays suffer greatly from this defect. His characters give little impression of reality. They are made according to a definite formula. Hernani has the clothes of a bandit but the soul of a hero. Triboulet unites the deformed body of a jester with the heart of a devoted father. Marion Delorme has a pure soul in a prostitute's body and Lucrezia Borgia is a monster of immorality sanctified by maternal love. It is impossible to believe in these contrasts, especially when the action itself owes its development to such artificial devices as disguises, misunderstandings and unexpected recognitions. These are the ingredients of melodrama and Hugo, a poser, wholly lacking in a sense of humour and in the power of self-criticism, had neither the detachment of the objective dramatist nor the power to give reality to the creations of his imagination. But he was a great poet and he brought a gust of much needed fresh air into the chill and fusty atmosphere of the *Comédie Française*.

Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863) began, as a dramatist, with translations of Shakespeare and his original plays number only two. The first, *La Maréchale d'Ancre*, dealt with events in the reign of Louis XIII and showed the struggle for supremacy between rival factions. The plot was exceedingly involved and the action hindered by the introduction of a number of minor characters. But the second play, *Chatterton*, was very different. There was practically no external action and no trace of the exaggerated characters and monstrous deeds

to be found in Hugo's dramas. The interest of the play lay in the analysis of the mind of the young poet who, finding his genius unrecognised, gave up the struggle for life and was speedily followed to the grave by Kitty Bell, the misunderstood wife of his coarse-fibred landlord. The idea that poets should be allowed to follow their bent untrammelled by social duties or the sordid cares of life was bound to be popular with the Romantics. But most of them would have treated the subject far more hysterically than Vigny. In his play deeds took second place to ideas and the struggle went on within the tortured mind of the central figure. The fact that Chatterton was too much of a weakling to hold the spectator's sympathy mars the play, but the fault lies rather in the nature of the subject than with Vigny.

The Romantics, excellent poets, were not good dramatists. Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) of all the writers of the age was the least under the influence of the movement, and for that very reason his plays were the finest. He welcomed the freedom of form allowed him. But his virtues were his own and he quickly became intolerant of the exaggerations, the abuse of local colour and the portentous solemnity of his fellows. He was deeply sensitive and highly excitable. Through his *liaison* with George Sand he knew the heights of happiness and the depths of despair and, as a result of that celebrated affair, he plunged into dissipation which undermined his constitution without defiling his mind. But he never forgot George Sand. Absinthe made the heart grow fonder.

He began to write plays early. As, however, he worked without any definite idea of having them produced—and most of them were published before they were staged—he was able to follow his own inclination instead of forcing his ideas into the uncongenial Romantic mould, in order to comply with the fleeting taste of the day. Love was almost the

sole theme of his plays. But it was love viewed in a purely personal way and from a variety of angles.

In *Les Caprices de Marianne* two characters personify the noble and the base elements of his own complex character. In *Lorenzaccio*, his most powerful and most Shakespearean piece, he depicts a man voluntarily aping the vices of Alexandre de Medici in order to disarm his suspicions and so be the more easily able to kill him. But in so doing he becomes himself a slave to vice unable to aspire to the love of a decent woman.

Musset was not always so grave. In *A Door must be Open or Shut*, he wrote with exquisite delicacy and deftness. His heroines, rich or poor, worldly-wise or inexperienced, are all appealing, and in each of the lovers who woo them there is something—joyous, passionate or sarcastic, of Musset himself. His plays range from the trivial to the profound. The psychology is invariably acute and the whole series written with consummate artistry and taste. Most of them illustrate the title as a proverb points a moral, but delicately and wistfully. *No Joking with Love* is a good example. Here an old baron has arranged that his niece and her cousin shall marry. The girl, however, is thinking of entering a convent. Out of pique the young man takes up with a village girl and the other finds she is jealous. So she speaks to her cousin and the two are betrothed. But the neglected village girl commits suicide and the pair part in horror-struck remorse. Musset alone of his age was able to reconcile classic simplicity and truth with liberty of form.

The Romantic movement was short-lived. It carried within it the seeds of its own decay. Colour and freshness could not atone for want of balance and extravagance. The Romantic poet was primarily interested in his own feelings. But his ideas were often trivial and insincere. It was not long, therefore,



before a reaction took place in favour of accurate observation and writing based on real, not imagined experience. Gautier began as a Romantic and ended by striving for perfection of form. George Sand gave up romantic novels for simple stories of country life. Flaubert developed a belief in impersonality in art and his closely observed, psychological novel *Mme. Bovary*, recently dramatised, threw into merciless relief the unreality of Romantic fiction. Philosophy and thought began to replace lyrical impulse. Hugo lived until long after Romanticism had given way to realism. But he was a lone figure, though it is true that, at the close of the 19th century, Edmond Rostand produced a brilliant justification of Romantic drama with *Cyrano de Bergerac*. This work owed something of its success to the greatness of the actor Coquelin. But, even in an indifferent English version, it remains a splendid play. The hero is a typically romantic figure grotesque in appearance and great of heart. There are certain fustian lines and unlikely situations, particularly in the fourth act. But the whole play is in the highest degree touching and stirring. Rostand achieved considerable success with *L'Aiglon*, a play dealing with the son of the great Napoleon, but here the characters are theatrical and unconvincing. His *Fantasticks* is a delightful piece of artifice, reminiscent of Musset, though the pedant might argue that the play logically ends at the close of the first act. It is by *Cyrano*, however, that Rostand will be remembered. He was clever enough to select as his hero an obscure personage of whom little was known, idealise his character, and place him in a colourful setting. The man who woos a girl on behalf of another, though in love with her himself, is a familiar figure. No one has treated the subject so splendidly as Rostand.

He wrote long after the Romantic movement as

a whole was discredited. It is still under a cloud—perhaps unduly dense. There was much affectation and want of proportion about it. But it came into being at a moment when the French drama was likely to die of inanition. And whatever absurdities may be urged against the Romantics, it was they who established the author's right to treat of any theme and in whatever way he pleased. That was a signal and a lasting service.

## CHAPTER XI

### DRAMA UNDER THE SECOND EMPIRE

THE Romantics had effectually destroyed the classical tradition. After 1850 their own dramatic output dwindled to nothing, but the freedom of form for which they had striven remained. Ponsard wrote a piece on Charlotte Corday in the style and language of the 17th century, but the action of the play covered thirteen months and required ten changes of scene. He was attempting a compromise between the old and the new. Rigid classicism, however, had gone for good. The Romantics had accustomed the audience to deeds of violence and the portrayal of brutal and overmastering passions. They had mingled comedy with tragedy, so that the difference between the two was no longer clearly defined.

But the public was weary of imaginative debauches and improbability. Stendhal, originally a member of the Romantic group, developed into an analytical writer. Mérimée, though he described semi-civilised and picturesque people, did so with sobriety and restraint. Flaubert wrote impersonally and took immense care over the delineation of character. The influence of Balzac's novels was enormous, both on the drama and on fiction. Classical art had isolated characters in a vague or abstract locality. The Romantics had placed the creatures of their fancy in a rich, foreign or medieval frame. Balzac put his in a precise, realistic and contemporary setting. He described a street or a village with photographic exactitude. He could convey with extraordinary skill

the significance of inanimate objects, the interior of a miser's home or the atmosphere of a boarding-house. The gestures, habits, thoughts and clothes of his characters were closely observed. The Romantics had written chiefly of love. For Balzac money, not love, was the greatest force in life and the Second Empire (1852-1870) was a period of gross materialism. Dramatists copied Balzac's realistic setting. They portrayed contemporary society and their work, in consequence, took the form of social comedy and comedy of manners. Ponsard was the first to attack the materialism of the age. In two comedies, *Honour and Money* and *The Stock Exchange*, he lashed out at those who placed ill-acquired dignities and riches above honourable poverty.

Realism was, at this stage, only comparative, though in marked enough contrast with Romantic writing. Playwrights were not yet trying wholeheartedly to turn a play into a slice of life. They were too much under the influence of Scribe for that. Real life is an untidy affair and the public demanded a neat and ingenious plot.

For forty years Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) had provided the light fare for the *Gymnase* and half a dozen Paris theatres. He wrote 400 plays without creating a single memorable character. His personages are dressed as colonels or sempstresses and we accept them as such. But they are all marionettes, not living men and women, though the wires are manipulated with extreme skill. Lacking life themselves, they give an impression of it thanks to the ingenuity of the plot. Scribe excelled in knotting and double knotting his intrigue. When the spectator was certain that there was no way out, he would give a deft tug and the tangled thread would straighten out. His methods were too subtle to please totally uneducated people, his style too negligent to satisfy the erudite. But

he delighted the average *bourgeois*. He captured the state of mind and gratified the feelings of a large proportion of the audience and portrayed beings who were actually totally unreal and yet reflected the onlookers in a distorting mirror. He was a masterly exponent of what was known as the 'well-made' play. His works were neither a slice of life nor a criticism of society. In his view a dramatist was a skilful craftsman, working to entertain people of ordinary intelligence and transport them from the workaday world to a land of romantic adventure. The characters wore the clothes and spoke the language of the time. There were none the less dolls, moving amusingly within a well-carpentered frame.

There was a revolt against the superficial brilliance of Scribe. But the serious playwrights who sought to criticise and comment on real life could not do without his stage tricks and devices. Émile Augier (1820-1889), though limited in scope, was very nearly a great dramatist. He began by comedy of manners in verse and then turned to prose. He was a *bourgeois*, not in the mean sense, but in his dislike of the romantic outlook, by which love was made an excuse for any kind of unworthy conduct. He was primarily concerned with safeguarding family life.

In *Le Gendre de M. Poirier*, written in collaboration with Jules Sandeau, he pointed out the danger to family unity when a rich, ambitious merchant gives his daughter a huge dowry and marries her to a reckless, impoverished nobleman. The same warning underlies *Un Beau Mariage*, where an engineer, rich only in talent, marries into a wealthy and disdainful family. Domestic tranquillity is threatened again when, in *The Marriage of Olympia*, an adventuress weds a respectable *bourgeois* in order to secure herself a good social position and at once begins to yearn for the old, hectic life. More powerful still is *Maître Guérin*.

Here a shady lawyer seeks to dower his daughter with the revenue of a château by using trickery to dispossess the girl who owns it. But his son foils the scheme by falling in love with her and marrying her himself. Finally, his own wife, disgusted by his sordid stratagems, abandons him and Guérin, unmasked and discredited, is left with accomplices as mean as himself for his sole companions. Outside the family Augier saw much, likewise, to disquiet him. In *The Shameless* he attacked the danger to society of a press controlled by unscrupulous financiers and, in *The Contagion*, he depicted a young man whose character was being undermined by the prevailing scepticism and lack of moral standard.

It is easy to divine Augier's ideas from his plays. He took, like Molière, a sensible view. A noble should not marry a *bourgeoise*, a scholar a society girl, or an honest man an adventuress. If he does, both honour and happiness are likely to be compromised. The partners to a marriage should be of the same rank and fortune and the matter of the dowry was an important one. Not that money could bring happiness. But there was a mean between marrying for money and romantic love in a cottage. The state of society alarmed him and he ascribed its evil plight to progressive decline of the moral sense. There was far too much cheap mockery of solid virtues, and a man ought to have the courage to be honest, even if it meant being ridiculed. Augier's was a morality of common sense.

He had, therefore, a serious purpose. But he was well aware that the public wanted entertainment. His plays, disquieting in the opening acts, generally end happily. Unpleasant people are offset by nice ones, but they are not mere abstractions of good and bad qualities. He drew them from observation rather than from his imagination and made them speak naturally according to their character and class.

*Le Gendre de M. Poirier* (1854) is Augier's most famous play. Here a spendthrift young noble, Gaston de Presles, tells his friend the Duc de Montmeyran, that he has married Antoinette, the daughter of the wealthy *bourgeois*, Poirier, who has paid his huge debts and given him an allowance and lodging under his roof. This is an opening typical of the 'well-made' play. It is artificial. Seeing that the Duke is Gaston's best friend, he would surely know more of the marriage than he appears to. Augier tries to cover the lack of likelihood by saying that Montmeyran is newly returned from foreign service, but the conversation remains a theatrical device employed to acquaint the audience with the situation. There is a second and more glaring improbability. Gaston has made a marriage for purely mercenary motives. He is indifferent to his wife and despises his father-in-law. It is difficult to believe that, having managed to acquire a considerable allowance, he would not have bargained further and insisted on a separate establishment in less uncongenial surroundings. It is an unnatural arrangement, demanded by the exigencies of the plot and taking little account of the supposed character of the man. These may seem carping criticisms, but they are necessary indications of fundamental defects in the 'well-made' play. There were far worse offenders than Augier. Openings of this type are still frequent and generally take the form of a telephone call or a conversation between an inquisitive friend of the family and an incredibly talkative servant. But they are not true to life and, consequently, out of place in a piece that claims to be serious realistic drama.

After this beginning we see M. Poirier and learn in a very effective scene that ambition, the hope that he himself may one day receive a title, has led him to arrange so expensive a marriage. Gaston who had wedded so lightly, is gradually awakening to the

unexpected charm of his wife, but he is still under the spell of a former mistress. Poirier finds a letter to him from this woman and opens it. He threatens divorce and public scandal, but the young wife tears up the note. Gaston is touched by her action and ashamed of himself. She insists on a separation and he comes to say good-bye, before going off to fight a duel with a man who has been his rival in the affections of the writer of the letter. He declares that he would do anything to gain his wife's esteem and she demands as proof of his sincerity that he should refuse to fight. He pleads his honour, but she insists and, at last, he yields reluctantly. Her point gained and satisfied of his love for her, she then bids him go and fight and return safely to her. He is about to set out joyfully when an apologetic letter, calling off the encounter, reaches him from his rival. And so, unnaturally enough, the happy ending is secured and kind hearts are duly proved superior to coronets. Augier was of the school of Molière, but he lacked the comic verve and the power to draw characters of lasting truth.

Alexandre Dumas  *fils*  (1824-1895) preserved the realistic setting, but with him the theatre came to be a lesson in morals as well as a picture of contemporary manners. For Molière the moral had been suggested by laughter directed against those who erred. Augier had stressed his lesson more heavily. Dumas  *fils*  drove it home with a hammer. His dramas were pure thesis plays in which the author's views were put into the mouth of a character known as the *raisonneur*, a kind of survival of the Greek chorus commenting on the action. Thesis plays dealt with social problems, such as divorce or questions of capital and labour, the comic element only being introduced to lighten the atmosphere and allotted to secondary personages.

Dumas began with the determination to make good



his case. Consequently the people are seldom more than embodied arguments, whose actions are dictated by the necessity of proving the author's point of view. Furthermore, since the problems treated had only a transitory or topical interest, Dumas' plays have worn worse than Augier's. They were at one time, however, enormously popular.

Being a natural son of Dumas *père* and therefore somewhat on the fringe of society, he was apt to deal in his plays with people who are victimised by their ambiguous social position. This is true of the celebrated *Lady of the Camellias* (1852). The heroine, Marguérite Delorme, a lady of many amours, is led back to innocence through her love for young Duval. They are perfectly happy, leading an idyllic existence in the country. His father comes to see her, prepared to buy her off, but she indignantly refuses his money. He then points out that his daughter is engaged and that the match will be broken off, if a member of her family is known to be living with a notorious woman. He adds that his son's love for her will die, when he realises how his association with her has prevented him from taking his proper place in the world. She sees the justice of this and leaves a note for Armand Duval saying that she has left him for another man. Only by this means can she hope to disillusion him and she plunges, heart-broken, into her former hectic life. It is not until she is dying of consumption that Armand learns the reason for her action and she dies happy. It is a strong play and enjoyed a terrific vogue. Verdi's opera *Traviata* was based upon it. The piece was played all over Europe and Marguérite, having coughed out her life artistically on innumerable stages, has recently repeated her performance on the screen.

And yet, considered rationally, the play is hopelessly biased. Bernard Shaw in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Frederick Lonsdale in *Spring Cleaning* have drawn

very different pictures of a prostitute. The cynic need not be right and the sentimentalist wrong. But there are surely two sides to the question. Dumas takes no account of the degradation of character caused by Marguérite's manner of life prior to her meeting with Armand Duval. It is possible to pity without idealising. Dumas deliberately weighed down the scale to prove his thesis.

Other plays contained renewed appeals for the victims of misfortune. In *The Natural Son* he condemned the father who was only willing to recognise the child when he could be proud of him. In *Les Idées de Mme. Aubray* he put in a plea for a girl, once seduced, whose later conduct has earned her the right to contract an honourable marriage. He protested that early faults should not entail a lifetime of expiation and censured the egotism which allowed innocent children to suffer for their parents' sin. He certainly did not take the Romantic view that love justifies everything, but he did demand that men and women should be judged by the same standard.

Dumas' dramatic methods are at fault rather than his ideas. Most of his people are prone to moralise and have only one characteristic, either bad or good. Certain scenes are excellent 'theatre' and the language is often brisk and witty, though not always in keeping with the supposed character of the spokesman. The root of the trouble lies in the preconceived thesis. Such writing comes very close to propaganda and Dumas' successor, Eugène Brieux, born in 1858, is frankly a propagandist. *The Benefactors* is an attack on philanthropic institutions, *The Three Daughters of M. Dupont* an assault on the system of marriages of convenience. *The Red Robe* deals with the maladministration of criminal justice and *Damaged Goods* with the mischief of contagious disease. Propaganda, in the opinion of Brieux, a serious-minded reformer,

is only to be deplored when it is unfair. But good propaganda generally means bad art, and Brioux is not to be compared with such men as Galsworthy.

Obviously a thesis play must deal with a serious subject. The faults of the type, therefore, are not to be found in the farce of the period. It is possible to read into Labiche's *Poudre aux Yeux* a warning against pretentiousness and, into his *Voyage de M. Perrichon*, written in collaboration with Martin, an attack on vanity and egotism. But primarily both plays are farces, that is, to paraphrase Mr. Hamilton Fyfe's definition, pieces 'depicting conceivably possible people doing highly improbable things.' As such they are excellent and have worn very much better than others of their kind.

This is not the case with Victorien Sardou (1831-1908). His romantic, pseudo-historical dramas such as *Mme. Sans-Gêne*, from which the popular musical comedy, *The Duchess of Dantzic* was derived, are tawdry, though full of zest, and *La Tosca*, the source of Verdi's opera, is too melodramatic to be convincing. His best work was in comedy of manners. He wrote with something of the facility of Scribe, but following the method of Augier. He depicted ably enough the foibles and fashions of the day, grafting on to the main comic action a sentimental sub-plot which did not fit in too happily with it. As with Augier, the atmosphere became more tense and forbidding as the play progressed. Then in the last act the real issue was shirked and a happy ending triumphantly produced. Sardou handled his plots well, but his plays are well-made pieces of theatrical mechanism.

In the lighter sphere of drama memorable work was done by Meilhac and Halévy, whose delightful operettas (*La Belle Hélène*, etc.) were set to music by Offenbach. They were the Gilbert and Sullivan of their day with a deft ironical touch. But Second

Empire Drama as a whole has not stood the test of time. The writers served as models to playwrights in half the countries of Europe. There is much of them in the early work of Pinero, for instance.

The thesis and the 'well-made' play were not necessarily distinct. The two were frequently combined, but both suffered from a fundamental defect. The writer of a thesis play is bound to manufacture his evidence in order to prove his case, and sacrifice everything to the necessity of making good his argument. He is almost certain, too, to preach, and drama, as Synge put it, 'is like a symphony—a beautiful creation, which is an end in itself and proves nothing.'

The writer of 'well-made' plays, for his part, is forced to sacrifice everything to the exigencies of an artificial plot. In both cases characterisation is lost, and the personages are either puppets or mouthpieces.

Plays were trivial or unreal, biased in view or artificially constructed. It was then that a giant figure appeared from a wholly unexpected quarter. The technique and the prevailing conception of drama underwent a far-reaching change for the better. The man who brought it about was Henrik Ibsen.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE SCANDINAVIANS

UNTIL the middle of the 19th century Scandinavian drama was little known outside the countries of its origin. It had found its earliest theme in national legends. Ibsen's first plays, such as his *Warriors at Helgeland* (1857) were of this type and, though he contrived to invest the impersonal figures of the old sagas with qualities of human interest, there is nothing very remarkable about them. Nor had later Scandinavian drama been of outstanding merit. The writing was largely imitative and the influence of Scribe and other French dramatists had popularised the 'well-made' play in Norway as elsewhere. It was Ibsen's mature writing that made him of the highest significance in the history of European drama.

It is difficult to know to what extent Ibsen's work was affected by the events of his life. But there is no doubt that early circumstances left their mark upon him.

He was born at Skien, a small town in Southern Norway, in 1828. His father, a merchant, entertained freely, but suddenly went bankrupt and the family had to move to a dilapidated farm-house, to be looked askance at by former associates. The same experience befell Dickens and neither he, nor Ibsen, so different from him in most respects, forgot the misery of these early days. Ibsen withdrew into himself and remained all his life aloof and chary of making friends.

He had a talent for drawing and wanted to be an artist. Lack of means forbade it, and at 15, he was apprenticed to an apothecary at Grimstad, where he spent five unhappy years. Then the reading, for an examination, of Sallust's account of Catiline's conspiracy in Republican Rome, together with the outbreak of the French Revolution of 1848, gripped his imagination. He began to dream of a world made different and, as a student at Christiania, took a hand in running a republican paper, luckily escaping arrest when the police raided the building. After that, fortunately for the drama, he lost interest in politics. He had no use for slogans and compromises. He proposed no remedies for what he could see was wrong. He was a critic not a reformer. He was concerned with fundamental truths. But he was a poet and a creative artist, not a propagandist.

His first decisive step was taken when, in 1851, he accepted a salary of £70 a year to act as director of the theatre at Bergen. He knew nothing about the work, but he was keenly interested. He read a great many plays and visited Copenhagen and Dresden to learn more of play production and public taste. When the theatre failed after five years, he had mastered conventional stage technique and was beginning to understand its faults.

In 1857 he was directing the theatre at Christiania and, in the following year, he married Susannah, the daughter of a pastor and of his wife Magdalene Thoresen, later well-known as a novelist. Ibsen sent his proposal in verse and called the next day in his best clothes for his answer. He waited uncomfortably in an apparently empty room and was about to leave, when a peal of laughter revealed the girl's presence under the sofa. It must have taken courage to make fun of a formidable suitor, who took himself so seriously, and it was probably very good for him. The marriage was not ideally happy. Ibsen was too spiritually alone for that, and it was out

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of his wretchedness that he created some of his finest work.

Certainly at this stage he was disillusioned and destructive, violently hostile to tradition and orthodox opinion. It was in this mood that he wrote *Love's Comedy*, ridiculing the sanctity of domestic life. It was amusing but extremely unwise. People were furious and his theatre went bankrupt. Finally, amid a storm of newspaper protest, the king awarded him a pension of £90 a year and, at the age of 36, Ibsen left the country for Rome. There he suffered from depression and malaria, but he felt free. In 1865 he wrote the great poetic drama, *Brand*, a study of a saint who sacrifices everything for a fanatical faith. This won him fame and a poet's pension. He followed it two years later with *Peer Gynt*, a picture of a humorous, quixotic scamp. It was this play that Grieg turned into an opera, whose merits the unmusical Ibsen was unable to appreciate.

He was too much in earnest to introduce humour into his later work. But *Peer Gynt* had a good deal, and his next play, *The League of Youth*, written in response to a suggestion by Bjørnsen, at one time his friend and always his rival in dramatic art, was a farce. It is an amusing play of the familiar Scribe type and describes the efforts of a young lawyer to gain control of the local administration of a small town. He is represented as a philanderer, an opportunist and a windbag. Bjørnsen, recognising in the central figure a caricature of himself and his political theories, was furious. Ibsen, absent in Egypt for the opening of the Suez Canal, did not hear the hisses of serious-minded Liberals and was subsequently reconciled with Bjørnsen, who was a kindly and sociable person.

This play was followed by the highly significant *Pillars of Society* (1877). Here a long conversation between the members of a sewing party informs us that



Johan, a relation of Bernick, the leading light of the town, had been surprised fifteen years before in an intrigue with an actress, had robbed his father's business and fled in disgrace to America. The actress had died soon after, leaving a small daughter, Dina, whom Bernick had adopted. Now Johan and his step-sister Lorna have landed from an American ship that has put in for repairs.

Bernick, as a respected citizen, is annoyed at their arrival, especially at a moment when he is using his influence to persuade the public to finance a railway scheme. But his real trouble is a guilty conscience. When Johan comes to the house we hear that it was Bernick who had been with the actress and Johan who, eager to escape to a freer life, had taken the blame. Nor had any money been stolen. Bernick had spread the report to account for the financial difficulties of the firm when he took it over. Johan does not object at first. But when he falls in love with Dina and a busybody tells her that it was Johan who had ruined her mother, he demands that Bernick should speak out. The other argues that, though his fortunes had begun with a lie, the livelihood of hundreds of workers depended on his personal prestige. Unimpressed, Johan prepares to re-embark, intending to settle up his affairs in America and return to clear his name. Knowing that the repairs are faulty, Bernick is tempted to let the boat sail, so that Johan may be drowned and his secret kept. Lorna urges him to speak out and then scornfully leaves him to his conscience. Bernick then hears to his horror that his little son has stowed away on the unseaworthy vessel. He is in a panic, until he learns that the foreman, on his own responsibility, has prevented the ship sailing. Then, seeing how near disaster dishonesty has brought him, Bernick at last speaks out. He reveals to the townsmen his earlier deception and also his intention to make an unfair profit from the railway scheme. He promises

amends and offers to resign, if the people no longer have confidence in him. He has proved himself a man.

This piece contains a few of the faults of the 'well-made' play. The whole first act and a dozen characters are needed to acquaint the audience with the facts. Furthermore, the change in Bernick is unconvincing and made to secure the happy ending demanded by the public. The later, more logical Ibsen would have allowed the boat to sail and sink, so that Bernick should see, when it was too late, the result of his deceit. But the play deals boldly and dramatically with a serious problem, Ibsen's salient idea being that absolute truth at any cost is essential in life and in society. Expediency is despicable. The play hints too at the right of the individual to lead his or more particularly, her own life. This idea was forcibly expressed in his next great play, *A Doll's House* (1879).

In this piece Nora, a sprightly young wife, has, unknown to her husband, committed a technical forgery to secure money to send him on a much-needed holiday. Her father would certainly have supplied the necessary sum, but he had died unexpectedly and she had forged his signature. A blackmailer threatens to inform the police unless she persuades her husband to reinstate him in his employ. This, not knowing the reason for her request, he firmly refuses to do and Nora resolves to commit suicide. A letter containing the incriminating facts has already been dropped into the letter-box, to which the husband alone has the key, when the blackmailer is persuaded by another character to relent.

Nora is about to go out and drown herself when her husband, Torvald, reads the letter. She had expected him to offer to take the blame and was intending to refuse and kill herself to save his reputation. But he makes no such suggestion and is ready to pay anything to hush the matter up. And, when a second letter arrives,

returning the original document, his comment is not: 'You are saved,' but 'I am saved!'

She is appalled at his lack of comprehension of her past mental anguish. She rounds on him, tells him he has treated her like a doll and thrust his conventional views upon her. . She announces her intention of leaving him, so that she may learn to stand on her own feet instead of accepting ready-made ideas. One day, perhaps, she will come back. She sweeps out and the curtain comes down as the front door bangs behind her.

At first sight this play is a tragedy. In reality it is the highest form of comedy. The thesis playwright would have represented Nora as a type of womanhood slaughtered on the altar of a husband's tyranny. Real people, however, do not have only one quality. They are complex. Nora fools herself. She is afraid, but she is also thrilled at having a guilty secret. Her husband did treat her as a doll, but her own coquettish ways had led him to do so. No doubt she honestly thought she would commit suicide. But she wouldn't have done so and, as for standing on her own feet, she would very soon have come back and reverted to the rôle of doll which she filled so nicely. She is a comic figure. So too is the husband with his high professions of morality and his instinctive desire to avoid a scandal at any cost. The serious purpose is there. Ibsen is maintaining the right of the individual against cramping convention. He was writing for the thoughtful spectator and, though there are rather theatrical contrasts of intense happiness and sudden uneasiness, he captured perfectly the subtlety of human nature.

After this the last trace of Scribe's influence disappeared. In *Ghosts* (1881), a tremendous play, there is no sign of the faults of Second Empire drama. Lorna had been something of a *raisonneur* in *Pillars of Society*, and the plot had been to some extent controlled, so as to prove the point of view. But in *Ghosts* the whole

action takes place naturally in Mrs. Alving's house and the personages are real people grappling with a terrific problem arising from the given nature of the characters.

Years before the opening of the play, Mrs. Alving had left her husband and gone to Pastor Manders who loved her. He had sent her back and now, a widow, she tells him that her whole married life had been a ghastly mockery. Oswald her son has come home. His doctor in Paris, where he was an art student, has told him that he is suffering from a hereditary taint which will drive him mad. But he, ignorant of his father's dissolute character, ascribes his incurable illness to his own excesses. His mother is torn between the desire to dispel his self-reproach and the conventional wish to make him respect his father's memory. At that moment the Pastor enters to say that the orphanage is on fire. This building is a kind of symbol. Mrs. Alving's reason bids her speak the truth, but her respect for tradition has led her to erect it as a memorial to her husband's supposed virtues and a sop to the 'ghost' of convention. The excitement of the fire brings on the threatened madness. Oswald had implored his mother to kill him when this happened. But she cannot, the forces of tradition are too strong.

The title refers to the shadow cast by the dead on the living through physical heredity. It also refers to the outworn views that persist long after reason has discarded them as absurd. The play reveals the vain efforts of a mind to shake off the weight of tradition, and there is irony in the fact that all the mother's self-denial cannot save her son from disaster. The implied moral is that love should never yield to convention. If Manders had run away with Mrs. Alving, convention would have been flouted but catastrophe prevented.

The play naturally gave great offence. The subject was distasteful to a smug age. Furthermore, established views, represented by Pastor Manders, were proved to

be wrong. There was an uproar. 'A dirty act done publicly' an English reviewer called the piece. Ibsen revenged himself by writing the highly amusing *Enemy of the People*, in which a Doctor is at first congratulated on discovering that the town's water supply is contaminated with typhoid germs, but roundly disbelieved when the cost of alterations is ascertained. Finally, he is turned out of town as an 'enemy of the people.' Men, in other words, blind themselves to the truth when it is unpleasant.

Symbolism appears again in *The Wild Duck*, for the bird of the title represents the pretence amid which the characters live. Disaster occurs when the well-meaning Gregers pulls aside the veil and reveals the truth to characters who are unable to stand it. This does not mean that Ibsen is going back on his belief in the necessity of absolute truthfulness. It is the faulty method not the principle that he condemns. The play is not a tragedy but a satirical comedy.

The symbolism of *The Master Builder* (1892) is far more obscure. The play deals with an architect who, at successive phases of his career, has built churches, homes for the people and a high tower. These three periods are generally taken to symbolise the three phases of Ibsen's own work, poetic plays, social dramas, and mystical pieces or fantasies.

*The Master Builder* is a puzzling work quite unlike such a cold, objective study of egotism as *Hedda Gabler*. The only point in common is the pessimism. That was characteristic of Ibsen. The English theatre has, on the whole, excelled rather in high comedy than in tragedy. At all events the public prefers cheerfulness to gloom. For that reason this country was slow to appreciate Ibsen, despite the efforts of Sir Edmund Gosse, Mr. William Archer and Mr. Bernard Shaw.

Ibsen's views may strike us as exaggerated or, at least, as controversial. We are doubtful whether the

minority is always right or conventional ideas and majority government invariably wrong. But the correctness of Ibsen's beliefs does not matter. He does not shout his ideas aloud. They are implied. He was not a propagandist, but a great creative artist. Right or wrong, he made people think. And thought had been too long absent from the stage.

He swept away the fashionable, complicated plots which had no relationship to everyday life. He dropped all theatrical tricks. The aside, the soliloquy, the stage confidant are artificial. So also is the *raisonneur*, the author's mouthpiece in the thesis play. All these the mature Ibsen avoided. He dealt boldly with problems agitating the hearts and minds of men. He was candid, even audacious, in treating domestic subjects. Shakespeare's tragedies had been plays of personal emotion. Ibsen brought ethics and sociology to the stage. He was not a photographer reproducing life. He intensified it. He laid bare real problems without offering a quack remedy to secure a happy ending. He bade the spectators think for themselves.

His reforms in the construction of a play were far-reaching. The old method had been to expose the problem or situation in the first act, develop it in the second and bring it to a climax and conclusion in the third.

In Ibsen's best works the action is already moving to a climax at the rise of the curtain. He lets the audience know, as the play progresses, what has taken place to lead up to the climax and his work gains immeasurably in intensity and concentration. His plays were concerned with the culminating incidents of a story, but the whole of it is made clear before the end of the piece. In *Hedda Gabler*, for instance, all the events conducive to the climax have occurred long before the rise of the curtain and we are made familiar with them, without the essential action being delayed for us to see them

happen. In *Ghosts* the tragedy began with the birth of the deceased child years before. We learn all about it as the action develops, without the interest being scattered by the introduction of scenes containing episodes from the boy's childhood. The emotional interest is strengthened and concentrated, so that the final effect is overwhelming.

This advance in stage technique is illustrated in the work of Galsworthy. In *The Silver Box*, his first play, the whole story is unfolded from the beginning. In *Justice*, written after the influence of Ibsen had made itself felt, the crime has been committed before the rise of the curtain and the dramatist was able to begin building up to a climax from the start of the play. The problems with which Ibsen dealt may be out of date. That does not affect his greatness. He profoundly influenced both the substance and the technique of drama.

Björnsen (1832-1910), though he wrote with humour and delicacy and made conventional characters come to life, never shook off the influence of Scribe. He was therefore more popular in his own country than Ibsen, whose work was gloomy and in advance of his time.

Björnsen so far followed Ibsen as to concern himself in his later plays with the problems and tragedies of everyday life. Thus *Leonarda*, a touching piece, is the story of a woman who falls in love with her adopted daughter's fiancé and goes away so as not to wreck the girl's happiness. *The Editor* attacks unscrupulous newspapers. *A Bankruptcy* deals with the tyranny of big business. *A Gauntlet*, the best of all, ends on a hopeful note for the two principal characters, but contains a condemnation of society which expects chastity in girls and tolerates immorality in men.

All of these might be Ibsen themes. But he would have handled them quite differently. Björnsen was a humanitarian and he allowed his views to be clearly apparent. Ibsen would never have manufactured evidence to prove a case or run the risk of making his characters

little more than illustrations of an argument. Bjørnsen produced a palliative. Ibsen suggested no remedy. He presented people and facts with remorseless fidelity to the truth, as he saw it, and with masterly dramatic effect. The thesis play, though its aim may be good, inevitably entails artificial manipulation of a plot and loss of characterisation. Propaganda and earnestness of purpose are not to be confused. Any serious play has some sincerely conceived idea behind it and the difference between propaganda and good art lies in the treatment. Bjørnsen lacked both Ibsen's concentrated technique and his creative imagination. He was a pleasanter person, but a lesser dramatist.

The Swede, August Strindberg (1849-1912) differed from Ibsen in writing of individuals instead of social problems, and from Bjørnsen, who befriended him, by his misogyny. In 1875 Strindberg was involved in an intrigue with an officer's wife and married her after the divorce. The union was not a success. None of his three marriages was. Bernard Shaw has annoyed sentimentalists by regarding woman as a huntress. For Strindberg she was a vampire and hatred of the sex was the greatest obsession of his life. He was hopelessly unbalanced, at times actually mad. A book of his, *Inferno*, reveals unmistakable signs of persecution mania.

Psychologists would be interested in his strange, brooding mind. The playgoer remembers him chiefly for his realistic or naturalistic pieces. He wrote 56 plays in all, but, in England, he is best known by *The Father* (1887). This is a ghastly and highly dramatic study of a man driven insane by his wife's refusal to tell him whether he is really the father of her daughter. Actually she has not been unfaithful, but ruthlessly allows suspicion to prey upon his mind, so that she may be free to bring up the girl in her own way. It is a powerful, if repulsive play, unrelieved by any spark of humour.



*Miss Julie* shows a noble's daughter who is induced by desire, propinquity and mortification over her broken engagement to encourage the advances of a footman. When it is too late, she recoils in horror from his vulgarity and cuts her throat. In the preface Strindberg appeals on technical grounds for simplicity of scenery, a minimum of make-up, and the abolition of the foot-lights in order to allow the actor to use his eyes to express emotion. His plays are well constructed. The plots are concise and work up to an effective end, allowing for the abnormality of the characters, a plausible climax.

They are uniformly depressing and it was, perhaps, to escape from painful reality that he turned to the writing of fairy and mystical plays. In these, oddly enough, the hopeless pessimist reveals himself as an idealist believing in the redeeming power of love. They vary widely in type. *Lucky Peter's Travels* is an allegory. *The Slippers of Abu Casem* is based on a legend of Haroun al Raschid, whilst *The Spook Sonata* is an incoherent and obscure piece of symbolism.

In these later plays Strindberg made free use of symbols. We see a bill-poster fishing with a net, a church organ turning into a cave, an officer shut up in a castle surrounded by hollyhocks. We see ourselves, also, in a state of bewilderment, which is not dispelled by Strindberg's statement in a preface that: 'time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality imagination spins threads and weaves new patterns.'

Strindberg, in point of fact, was experimenting with two different forms of drama. He was a pioneer both in naturalism and in expressionism. That is why, despite his morbidness and gloom, he is an important figure in dramatic history. Both these forms were more fully developed by German playwrights. The naturalistic movement came first.

## CHAPTER XIII

### NATURALISM IN THE THEATRE

THE Naturalistic movement in Germany dated from the foundation of the Berlin *Free Stage* by Otto Brahm in 1889. It stood for revolt against the 'well-made' piece in which situations were artificially created to make a play of dexterous craftsmanship without profound meaning. Naturalism was very fully developed in Germany. It was a reaction against Scribe. But it owed much to another Frenchman, Zola. In Balzac's novels there is a good deal of melodramatic incident. Zola (1840-1902) was far more consistently realistic.

Realism was not a new thing in France. It had existed in the classical age, but 19th century realism was quite different. Though 17th century writers looked for the truth, their realism was incomplete. They took no account of external nature and, in human nature, they neglected what was transitory or incidental in favour of universal and, on the whole, lofty characteristics.

Zola and his friends attempted, on the other hand, to attain a complete reproduction of reality. They gave detailed descriptions of the countryside. They portrayed bad as well as good qualities, individual as well as universal characteristics. But, in their desire to withhold nothing, they tended to concentrate on what was coarse and exceptional, so that their realism, too, was only partial, for they excluded what was noble and turned their attention to the least worthy aspects of human nature.

Flaubert's *Mme. Bovary* had aimed simply at faithful

observation and the reproduction of actuality. He wrote as vividly of ancient Carthage as he did of modern France and succeeded with great artistry in giving an impression of life. Zola carried realism to a more extreme form and claimed for it a scientific basis. In a series of 20 novels he showed that, despite differences of environment or social position, the same qualities are bound to appear in successive generations of the same family. He was, in a sense, writing to a thesis. Instead of starting, however, with a mere personal bias, he consulted statistics and made intensive first-hand investigations among factory and mine workers in order to prove that his conclusions were logical and inevitable. What mattered least was style and composition. He piled up his evidence with such scant regard for artistic selection that his work lacked proportion and the cumulative effect of reality was actually lessened rather than made more convincing. He was concerned with giving a cross-section of contemporary life and, whether from scepticism, natural pessimism, or disillusionment due to the disasters of the Franco-Prussian war, he and his fellows found life far more sordid than uplifting. All these characteristics of ultra-realistic fiction were represented in the naturalistic drama.

In 1887 André Antoine established the *Théâtre Libre* with the object of encouraging new experiments in drama. He was looking for works which would have no chance in the commercial theatre, where the 'well-made' play still held sway. Actually the majority of the pieces he produced at first were naturalistic dramas such as *Thérèse Raquin*. There was probably more partisanship in Zola's drama than he imagined. Flaubert was far more impassive and impersonal and, though a novelist not a playwright, his influence on the naturalistic dramatists was considerable.

Augier had been content to make people reflect uneasily in order to show what was wrong. Henry

Becque (1837-99), as interested as Zola in contemporary questions, but more aloof, claimed the right to reveal the truth in its brutal entirety. And he did it without borrowing any of the conventional stage devices.

In *Les Corbeaux* (1882) the fortunes of a *bourgeois* family are entirely ruined by the sudden death of the father. Becque makes it happen without warning, as so often occurs in real life. The widow and her three daughters have at once to cope with creditors—the 'carion crows' of the title. In the end one of the girls is forced into marriage with the most predatory of the rogues who are robbing them, in order to save the family from starvation. The creditors are unscrupulous, the women without will power, the ending quite unemphatic—a point which Tchekhov was to remember—and the plot no more than the bare minimum needed to hold the piece together. It is a ruthless, pessimistic picture of vulgar reality without any implied moral or the least vestige of humour.

Five years after the production of this play the *Free Theatre* was opened in Berlin. In 1890 the *Free People's Theatre* was founded by Bruno Wille, and Otto Brahm was made director of the *Deutsches Theater*, the headquarters of German naturalism, at which the famous producer, Max Reinhardt, began his career.

The first playwrights of the naturalistic school in Germany were Holtz and Schlaf who collaborated in a piece called *The Selicke Family*. Plays of Ibsen and Tolstoy were produced and many German dramatists began to write specifically for the *Free Stage*. One of the first was Hermann Sudermann (1857-1928). He was not a thorough-going naturalist, for he would not refrain from propaganda or sacrifice the clear-cut plot. Like Augier he handled problems of the day. In *Honour*, a rich man falls in love with a poor girl. Her brother angrily intervenes to put a stop to the affair and himself falls in love with the rich man's sister. It is a possible,

somewhat stage-made situation with a *raisonneur* introduced to preach a moral. The influence of the 'well-made' play is present too in *The Destruction of Sodom*, for in this piece, which is an attack on the wealthy classes, the villain conveniently dies so as to allow a solution of the problem. Again, in *Magda*, the story of a daughter's rebellion against a tyrannical father, the latter luckily dies of an apoplectic stroke when he is on the point of shooting her for disgracing the family honour. Sudermann tries to be fair to both sides. He sympathises with the old man's strait-laced ideas, but also with the new, emancipated woman who has inherited her father's obstinacy. It remains, nevertheless, a thesis play, ably but artificially constructed. Then Sudermann changed his style and devoted himself to social satire. The best known of the plays of this second manner is *Es Lebe das Leben* (*The Joy of Living*).

Years before the beginning of the action of the piece a Countess has had a love affair with a Baron. She sees him constantly, but their relations have long been platonic and she has made her unsuspecting husband perfectly happy. The baron replaces the husband, who is anxious to retire from politics, as an election candidate and wins the seat. His defeated rival gets hold of an incriminating letter from the Countess to him and threatens to publish it. The husband is about to sue him for libel when he is told by his wife and the baron that the accusation is true. A duel between the two men is out of the question, as it would acknowledge the scandal. The lover decides to commit suicide, but first makes a brilliant speech in the House on the sanctity of marriage. The wife, however, who has long suffered from heart disease, kills herself in such a way as to make it appear that death was accidental, and the two men are reconciled, leaving the baron free to continue his valuable work as a legislator.

The idea is that the woman, though in constant pain, has lived every moment of her life. Her influence is a

perpetual source of inspiration to her lover, whilst her husband, in ignorance of the episode, has known fifteen years of happiness with her. The play is a plea for toleration and a condemnation of the artificial code of society. Sudermann's early plays remind one of Galsworthy. *The Joy of Living* might have been the work of Pinero. It is 'good theatre.' It deals with a real problem, but it is written with an eye for telling situations.

Sudermann, who had been drifting towards naturalism, had suddenly swerved aside. German naturalism found its leading exponent in Gerhart Hauptmann, who was born at Salzbrunn in 1862.

The consistent naturalists, of whom he was the chief, aimed in the first place at the abandonment of tradition. They wished to reduce the conventions of technique to a minimum and wanted also to prevent the writer's personality from obtruding itself. In theory they were opposed to all means of representation, by which art achieves the illusion of life. They were not trying to create the illusion of reality, but to *be* real. This sounds fantastic, since the elimination of artistic selection of detail and the suppression of the writer's personality would make art as confused as life itself.

Actually, naturalistic drama did not become entirely shapeless. It took the form of a series of simple scenes, presenting a section of life, but arranged without an ordered building up to a climax. There is no involved plot and the acts are not subdivided into separate scenes. There is no attempt at theatrical effects. People come in and go out unobtrusively. Furthermore, we find no monologues, no convenient deaths, no characters arriving providentially, no unnatural reading aloud of letters, no *raisonneurs*, no confessions without adequate motive to justify them, no unlikely glibness of speech—in fact none of the conventional stage devices, by which Scribe and his imitators had conveyed information to

the audience or unfastened the neat and artificial knots which they had made.

In many plays the action depends for its continuity on a more or less improbable artifice. It is possible that Desdemona's handkerchief would fall into the wrong hands. It is far more likely that it would have been returned to her without mishap and that neither she nor the finder would have thought any further about it. That was Hauptmann's opinion and he refused to allow the exploitation of incidents which in real life would, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, have no important sequel.

There was another major point on which he joined issue with the writers of 'well-made' plays. They represented a struggle of wills as coming to a head in an effective climax. Actually the conflict of one will with another is seldom concentrated into a short space. Even more rarely does it culminate in a critical situation. It is often only after a long interval that we realise that a particular incident, a seemingly trivial decision that we made or a flash of self-assertion over some minor point, really constituted a crisis in our lives without our being aware of it at the time. Real life is apt to be most inartistically undramatic.

Hauptmann excluded the fortuitous or the unusual from his plays. He saw life as made up of little insignificant acts which by accumulation form a character, and this slowly formed character comes into conflict with environment. Most people, in Hauptmann's view, do not at crucial moments reveal widely divergent conceptions of duty or honour. Conflict between people does not arise in that way, but from the far more tragic struggle of man against a hostile environment or from the clashing of incompatible personalities held prisoners together by the bonds of social usage.

In *Before Dawn* Hauptmann showed the same interest in the question of heredity as Zola. A young social

reformer comes to visit an old friend, a farmer who has recently been enriched, like others in the neighbourhood, by the discovery of coal. He falls in love with one of the household, but, on finding that her father and sister are chronic drunkards and alcoholism is hereditary in the family, he tears himself away and the girl kills herself. It is more of a thesis play than Hauptmann's later pieces, but written on naturalistic lines. No human being is the villain. Environment has debased human nature and the arrival of the young man merely accelerates the crisis, forcing into suicide a girl who would, in any case, have degenerated later into a drunkard.

In *Lonely Lives* incompatibility and social conventions bring about the tragedy. A highly intellectual man, intent on creative work, is married to a well-meaning wife who cannot understand him. A Russian girl comes on the scene, who is ready and fitted to give the husband the platonic sympathy he needs. But the wife, backed up by her family, insists on her departure and the scholar, equally unable to live without her or get free of his domestic bonds, takes his own life.

*The Weavers*, written in 1892, is Hauptmann's masterpiece. This time the problem is social not domestic and the play, the action of which is supposed to take place in 1840, is concerned with men in the mass more than with luckless individuals. The weavers have no minimum wage, no trade union, no proper regulation of hours. They bring the cloth from their homes to the factory and are entirely at the mercy of the owners. They are bullied and cheated. A girl faints from hunger. A man kills his dog for food. At length the workers rebel against their inhuman treatment. They break into a revolutionary song, march off to their employer's house and sack it. Police and soldiers are summoned. There is some spasmodic shooting in which a weaver, who has doggedly remained at work, is killed. Nothing is achieved. There is no neat ending, no suggestion



of reform: nothing but a vivid picture of things as they are, or, at least, as Hauptmann saw them, for he made no attempt, as Galsworthy did in *Strife*, to be impartial.

Hauptmann made full use of the few naturalistic devices that he permitted himself. His stage directions were very detailed. He described both the appearance of the various characters and the gestures they should use. He distinguished between one member of the same class and another by a careful selection of turns of phrase and local dialect words. But the plays themselves were nearly as shapeless as real life.

Hauptmann did not remain a naturalistic dramatist. He had too much imagination to be content only to set down what he saw. The plays of his later manner were decidedly odd. In *Hannele* a child tries to drown herself and we see her delirium on the stage. The child's dead mother appears as though to protect her from the Angel of Death. The village school-master rebukes the girl's stepfather for his harshness and then takes on the likeness of Our Lord. Finally the village doctor announces that she is dead.

*The Sunken Bell* is a fairy play written in verse with a good deal of symbolism in it. Hauptmann also wrote comedies of which the best known concerns a beggar who is made dead drunk and told, when he awakes in luxurious surroundings, that he is a prince. It is an amusing piece strongly reminiscent of *The Taming of the Shrew* and Calderón's *Life is a Dream*. Hauptmann, however, is remembered chiefly as a naturalistic playwright.

Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) followed him as a naturalistic writer, but he showed too, a chaotic and horrible fancy. *The Awakening of Spring* is a children's tragedy, dealing with life in a boarding school. *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box* are frankly appalling themes. The plays trace the career of Lulu who drives two husbands to suicide, murders the third and is finally

killed by a sinister individual who turns out to be Jack the Ripper. *Franziska* is a parody of Goethe's *Faust*, whilst *Such is life* is an ironical play about a monarch who, dethroned by a revolution, becomes a famous comedian and is appointed jester to the monarch who has usurped his throne. When he reveals his identity, no one believes him and he is sent away as a lunatic.

There is little pure naturalism in Wedekind's clever but unpleasant work. It is too sensational for that. In any case, naturalism was no more than a passing phase. Hauptmann himself outgrew it and the objections to naturalistic drama are not far to seek. Firstly there are faults which, in theory, need not belong to naturalistic plays more than to works of other types, but which, in practice, were almost invariably associated with them. The majority of the dramatists of the school were, perhaps unconsciously, nearly as much propagandists as the writers of avowed thesis plays. Consequently that section of the audience which disapproved of the ideas put forward or implied disliked the play on principle, while those favourably disposed towards them were offended by the lack of artistry: for propaganda is seldom compatible with good art. Secondly, most of the naturalistic playwrights were extremely pessimistic and that too, apart from being wearisome, is a form of bias. Both these faults are incidental. But there is an inherent and far graver flaw in naturalistic drama.

Hauptmann and his fellows made the fatal error of regarding the faithful reproduction of reality as being the dramatist's ultimate goal. They excluded the unusual on principle, because it was not natural and normal, and consequently ran the risk of being dull. This snare might have been avoided, if their method had been different, for there are many excellent plays in which nothing startling takes place. But their belief was that the playwright should copy real life and real life, unfortunately, is both formless and undramatic, so

that the reproduction of it cannot possibly be good drama. Again, realistic stage dialogue is not an exact imitation of everyday conversation. A gramophone record of the remarks made during the evening by the members of an average family might serve as a salutary warning against irrelevance, incoherence and triteness, but it would not be entertaining. People cannot reasonably be expected to pay good money—as they must unless they are lucky enough to know the manager—to go to a theatre to hear actors talking *exactly* as their listeners do in real life, and performing the trivial, hum-drum actions which have been occupying the audience at home.

The extreme naturalistic method rested on a misconception of the function of drama. A realistic play does not reproduce reality. It gives the illusion of it. It is the business of the dramatist, as of every artist, to imagine, select, arrange and to give design and pattern to his work. Ibsen dealt logically with realistic themes. But he handled them dramatically. He told a realistic story and created convincing characters without sacrificing the form of his piece. That was where the naturalistic dramatists fall short. The playwright should be a painter. They mistook him for a photographer—and for a slum photographer at that.

Naturalism made itself felt likewise in stage settings, and here again its exponents went too far. Realistic drama requires a realistic setting, but discrimination is necessary. The atmosphere of a particular room, a business office, the best parlour in a working class home or a Victorian drawing room, can be suggested without every detail being reproduced with such fidelity to truth that the spectator's attention is distracted from the words and action of the play. The naturalistic producer left nothing to the imagination. His work was accurate and generally ugly. The modern producer aims at getting his effect while, at the same time, using grouping, arrangement and colour to create a picture. Naturalism was a

phase, a movement carried to excess in the desire to break with the triviality and insincerity of much earlier writing. A good deal of Russian literature is notoriously gloomy and pessimistic and Russian playwrights figured prominently in the realistic movement. But their work was distinctive and one dramatist, at least, rivals Ibsen in originality and importance.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE RUSSIAN THEATRE

RUSSIAN literature was for many centuries unaffected by that of Western Europe. Natural difficulties of communication were in part responsible. Another reason was the lack of intercourse between the Greek Church of Russia and the Church of Rome. Kiev was the centre of Russian life, until the Tartar invasion caused it to shift to Moscow, and the only writing of this early period took the form of epic poetry with the despised peasant rather than the knightly paladin as the hero. With the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, scholarship fled westwards to France and Italy, so that Russia had no opportunity to share in Renaissance culture.

The first printing press was set up in Moscow in the reign of Ivan the Terrible and the first book was printed in 1564, a century later than in England. The Greek Church controlled literature and looked on innovations and foreign learning with distrust. Not until the 17th century did progress from the outside begin. There were Germans in a suburb of Moscow and it was chiefly through them that the ideas of Western Europe slowly spread. The Protestant pastor of this community was ordered by the Tsar Alexis to write a comedy in honour of the birth of the Tsarevitch, the future Peter the Great (1672-1725), and this piece, on the subject of Esther and Ahasuerus, was duly performed in a theatre specially built for the occasion. Two years later the ballet was established.

Soon after, plays translated from the German were given, to be followed shortly by the first original play written in Russian, *The Prodigal Son*, by Simeon Polotsky.

The Tartar yoke had by now been thrown off. The Poles, at one time in occupation of Moscow itself, were beaten back and Russia with the aid of Peter the Great began to assert her nationality. He made the Church dependent on the State. He simplified the Russian script. He founded the first Russian newspaper. He had innumerable foreign books translated and did his best to force the customs of the West on his conservative subjects. His activities produced no immediate results in literature, for time was needed before the crop could grow. Peter the Great prepared the ground by letting in foreign influence, that of France being predominant.

The chief source of French ideas was the Empress Catherine II, who was actually German born. She was the friend of Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot, and sympathetic towards Rousseau's republican notions. But the outbreak of the French Revolution naturally caused a change of front in aristocratic Russia, as elsewhere. Radischev in his book, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, showed, without exaggeration, the appalling evils of serfdom and condemned the censorship. Twenty years earlier the Empress would have approved of the work. Now it was different. Radischev was banished to Siberia. He was ultimately pardoned, but a jesting threat of renewed imprisonment drove him to suicide. He was the first Russian writer to suffer for expressing opinions at the wrong moment: not, however, the last.

Up to this date no really national literature had been produced. French was the language of the cultured classes. The Russian tongue was waiting for someone

amzin (1765-

1826). Napoleon's invasion had aroused Russian patriotism and Karamzin's *History of the Russian Dominion*, which revealed to Russians both the interest of their own history and the richness of their language, was a great success. What Karamzin did for prose, Krylov (1768-1844) achieved in smaller degree for poetry by his fables in the manner of La Fontaine.

Another factor contributing to literature was political. Russian officers, returning from Paris after the Napoleonic wars, founded clubs aiming at philanthropy and reform. Persecution transformed reformers into revolutionaries. An insurrection broke out in December, 1825, on the occasion of the accession of Nicholas I. It failed and five conspirators were hanged, among them the poet Ryleev (1795-1826). Politically the results of this rising were negligible, but, in consequence of censorship and repression, politics were driven underground and liberalism found an outlet in literary romanticism. This was a boon to Russian literature, for men of genius became writers and artists instead of unsuccessful revolutionaries.

One indirect outcome of the 'Decembrist' outbreak was the famous comedy *The Misfortune of Being Clever* by Griboyedov (1795-1829), the Russian Sheridan. He was a Foreign officer and was murdered while serving as minister in Teheran. His play was freely circulated in manuscript but not performed until after his death. It is written in verse and, in accordance with French tradition, observes the unities.

In the first act Sophia is surprised by her father Famusov, an elderly Government official, in intimate converse with his secretary Molchalin, a perfect type of social climber. He sternly rebukes her, but her infatuation for the secretary who does not really care a rap for her, causes her to give a chilly reception to the wealthy Chatsky who has been absent from Moscow for three years. Nettled, he speaks bitterly

of Molchalin to Sophia at a reception that evening and she pays him out for his sarcasm by hinting to the other guests that he is mad. So when he breaks out into a long tirade against the follies of Moscow society, the guests are convinced that he is crazy and leave him declaiming to an empty room. In the last act Sophia catches Molchalin flirting with her maid and sends him about his business. Chatsky renews his attacks on society and Famusov, a pattern of conventionality, denounces his dangerous ideas. Chatsky loses his temper and flounces out of the house, leaving Sophia deprived of both her suitors. The hero himself is an improbable person, but the other characters and the dialogue throughout are wonderfully natural. The play is a fine, original satire on contemporary Moscow society.

A much greater writer was Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), who was of mixed blood, being descended on his mother's side from Peter the Great's negro, Hannibal. He began by writing in French but soon turned to the vernacular and became famous in prose, verse and drama. He learned English and was much influenced by Byron. His poem, *Poltava*, was on the same theme as Byron's *Mazeppa* and his great work *Onegin* which, though in verse is virtually a novel of Russian life, was suggested to him by Byron's *Beppo*. He resembled him also in his stormy life, for both were rebels and men of many love affairs. Pushkin, too, at least in his early work, was a Romantic although Russian romantic literature, while being highly imaginative is, unlike the writing of Coleridge or Hugo, concrete in its descriptions and deeply rooted in everyday life and reality.

A second English influence on Pushkin was that of Shakespeare. One of his short plays, or rather a narrative with a couple of scenes in dialogue, deals with the same story as *Measure for Measure*. His



greatest play *Boris Godunov* is Shakespearean in its variety of characters and in the handling of crowd scenes. There are crafty courtiers, an idiot boy, rascally monks, peasantry and so forth. There, however, the resemblance ends. The play is not so much a connected drama as a succession of short scenes with the emotions of the characters revealed only by monologues instead of by a dramatic conflict of wills.

Moussorgsky, in his operatic version, concentrated the piece into acts. The play itself is a series of 24 scenes, the story covering a period of six years or so, the setting shifting from place to place. An opening conversation tells us that the upstart Boris is suspected of murdering the seven year old son of Ivan the Terrible in order to pave his own way to the throne, which he feigns reluctance to accept. This story is told later to a young monk and he, thirsting for freedom and power, escapes from the monastery, eludes his pursuers, proclaims himself the supposedly murdered Tsarevitch, rallies the malcontents and defeats the forces of the usurper. Boris dies and the play ends with the murder of his son, an act of poetic justice for his own method of ascent to the throne. It is by the poetry that the play lives.

Following Pushkin's death prose drama came to the fore, particularly with the work of his friend Nicholas Gogol (1808-1852), whose writing is a successful refutation of the charge of unvarying gloom, so often levelled at Russian literature. Gogol produced some fantastic stories, but he was also a close and satirical observer of life, as is amply shown by his novel, *Dead Souls*, much of which, despite the title, is exceedingly comic. As a dramatist Gogol is immortalised by *The Government Inspector*, the essential point of which was suggested to him by Pushkin who, while staying at Nishni-Novgorod, had been mistaken for an important official.

In this comedy a provincial mayor, having received a warning from a friend that the Government is sending an inspector incognito to see how the town is being run, calls an emergency meeting of his colleagues. They are in anxious consultation when news arrives that a young man has been staying at the local inn for a fortnight without paying his bill. The Mayor decides that this high-handed visitor must be the inspector and heads a belated deputation to welcome him. Actually, the young man is a clerk who has gambled away his money and, when the mayor arrives, he imagines that the landlord has summoned him and is at first as scared of the Mayor as the latter is of him. After a while, however, he guesses something of the truth and suffers himself to be led off to the Mayor's house where he is royally entertained and flirts indiscriminately with the wife and daughter. Each of the town officials forestalls his attempts at raising a loan by offering bribes to ensure a good report on his return to St. Petersburg, and he finally goes off with a considerable sum and the promise of the Mayor's daughter in marriage. It is only after his departure that the postmaster, whose habit it is to open the correspondence that passes through his hands, discovers the truth from a letter the clerk had written to a friend telling him of his adventures. This he reads aloud, to the joy of all those who have suffered from the Mayor's pomposity, and the play ends with a peremptory summons from the real Inspector who has just arrived in the town.

The play is a satire on Russian bureaucracy. Though everyone in it is dishonest, it is not bitter or unsympathetic but a classic comic creation. The Censor would have banned the piece had not the Emperor himself read it with much amusement and ordered its performance. Even after a hundred years the play is frequently staged in Russia and, with the English

version, Charles Laughton made one of his greatest successes. Of Gogol's other plays a one act piece *The Gambler*, which shows how a sharper is outwitted by others, deserves mention for the ingenuity of its plot.

With the establishment of the 2nd French Republic in 1848 censorship became even stricter in Russia. A small society which met on Fridays to discuss abstract subjects was discovered by the police and its members punished with extreme severity. Twenty-one, after being sentenced to death, were reprieved and sent either to Siberia or into the army. Dostoevsky was one of them. This period with its stifling of all liberty was the darkest in Russian literary history. But with the accession of Alexander II during the Crimean War there began an era of reform. The serfs were emancipated, the systems of justice and local government revised. With the gag loosened, if not altogether removed, writers breathed more freely and the age produced the three great novelists Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Of these three the last was not a dramatist, though scenes from some of his novels have been adapted for the stage. Turgenev (1818-1883), too, is far better known as a novelist than as a playwright. His dramatic writing was confined to the early part of his career. Even so, *A Month in the Country* is an interesting piece. It concerns a woman, Natalia, fond of her hard-working husband and placidly aware of the platonic love of Rakitin, a friend of the family. Her ward Vera, a girl of 17, falls in love with a Moscow student and Natalia realises with self-contempt that she is jealous of the girl. The husband puts down his wife's distress to love for Rakitin. Vera, child though she is, feels that she cannot stay in the house with Natalia as her rival and takes refuge in marriage with a man three times her age whom she despises.

The student goes away. So, too, does Rakitin who is deprived, owing to the husband's jealousy, of the harmless but very real pleasure he feels in Natalia's society. The play ends with the supposition that, in time, husband and wife will come together again. The idea is that well-ordered lives can be upset by passion. It is a good situation, but the characters seem bookish and unreal. The same criticism applies to Turgenev's other plays *A Provincial Lady* and *A Poor Gentleman*.

A far truer note was struck by Alexander Ostrovsky (1823-1886), who wrote mainly of the merchant class. Some of his plays are dull, others offended influential people or failed to pass the censor and for a while he took to writing historical plays intended to be read not acted. He wrote fifty pieces in all. *The Forest*, is an excellent comedy and *The Storm* (1859) is a moving tragedy which plays very well.

The hypocritical Mme. Kabanova, jealous of her daughter-in-law Katrina, and the merchant Dikoy, who ill-treats his nephew Boris, are the chief instruments of the tragedy. Boris falls in love with Katrina, but he is too shy and she too virtuous to make advances. Her sister-in-law who has no such diffidence brings them together, but ten days later the intrigue is discovered. Terrified by a violent thunder-storm, Katrina blurts out the truth. Boris is sent away and the girl, tormented by her mother-in-law, drowns herself. The implied moral is that the serf in search of freedom must break his own chains.

There is no ranting or melodrama and none of the artificial devices of the 'well-made' play. Granted the environment and nature of the two, the outcome has the inevitability of Greek tragedy. By this play Ostrovsky showed himself the founder of modern realistic Russian drama. But his work was free from the sordidness of the naturalistic writers.

Tolstoy (1828-1910) is best known as a novelist and philosopher. But he wrote several interesting plays, one of them a masterpiece. Nearly all contain something of his characteristic ideas. He professed opposition to every form of violence or compulsion, to enforced government as well as to war or revolution, and he condemned the possession of private property.

It was only in the last years of his life that he put an end to the glaring contradictions between his theory and his practice—for he was a wealthy man tied to a family who had no sympathy with his philosophy—by adopting peasant dress and doing manual labour. He was on his way to enter a monastery, when he collapsed and died at a wayside railway station.

In art, too, Tolstoy held decided opinions. He regarded individuality, clarity and sincerity as the prime virtues and, although he allowed something for mere ornament, he denounced the triviality of much so-called great literature and said that an artist should be judged by the positive good his work does or tries to do. Furthermore, it must be religious in the sense of uniting men to God or with one another.

It was because of its comparative triviality that he failed to complete *The Light Shines in Darkness*, the fifth act of which is only in synopsis form. The play is autobiographical in that it shows a rich landowner, whose conscience smites him but who cannot make his wife share his views. He tries to give his estate away and salves his conscience by making it over to her. He urges his son, who is in the army, to refuse to obey orders and the boy dies as the result of hardships suffered in a penal battalion. At last having accomplished nothing but the breaking up of his home life he kills himself.

This play is not a refutation of Tolstoy's ideas, but rather an indication that the necessary changes can only

be achieved if everyone, and not merely an isolated individual looks to his conscience. At the same time he laughs at his own inconsistencies and makes his sincere, blundering reformer into a tragi-comic figure. Slighter, but more amusing is *The Fruits of Enlightenment*, written for private performance by his family. It merely shows a servant duping her employer who believes in spiritualism. Even in this trifle, however, there is a plea for more land for the peasantry and a condemnation of the parasitic gentry. This latter idea is at the root of *The Living Corpse*. Here a man forfeits his wife's affection by his infidelities and, shrinking from the squalor of divorce proceedings, pretends to drown himself. A blackmailer reveals the truth to the authorities and, to prevent his wife's conviction for bigamy, he shoots himself. The play contains also a condemnation of alcohol and this is expressed more fully in two playlets, *The First Distiller* and *The Cause of it All*.

In all these pieces the characters are puppets, moving and speaking so as to justify Tolstoy's ideas. But in his greatest play, *The Power of Darkness*, this defect is not apparent. It is a gruesome story of a peasant woman, Anisya, who murders her husband so as to marry her lover Nikita. When the latter learns the truth after the wedding, however, he recoils from her with loathing, drowns his thoughts in drink and takes up with her stepdaughter Akulina. As a result of this association the girl has a baby. Nikita is afraid of scandal, so Anisya, hoping to regain his affections, contrives with the aid of his mother, Matrona to smuggle away the infant, which he is prevailed upon to kill and bury. But, haunted by remorse, he blurts out the whole story at the party given in honour of Akulina's engagement to another peasant.

Though it is a grim play, this confession lightens the atmosphere and shows good triumphing over evil in almost hopeless circumstances. Tolstoy does not senti-

mentalise over the peasants. He portrays them as drunken, greedy and brutish, but the system under which they live is at fault. There is a fine, if rather theatrical piece of contrast when, while the unwanted baby is being strangled, an old labourer, suspecting what is going on, consoles a frightened child by telling her of a baby his regiment had adopted and cared for during his army career. He is only an incidental figure, but Nikita's mother, Matrona, is a memorable character, repulsive, hypocritical and callous, yet in a queer, perverted fashion devoted to her son. In this piece at all events, Tolstoy did not make the mistake of giving his personages only one quality. They are complex and true. It is an immensely powerful realistic play, but it contains an element of melodrama which the true naturalistic playwrights would not have admitted.

Alexis Tolstoy, elder cousin of the philosopher, was a dramatist of a very different kind. He wrote a trilogy of historical tragedies in verse, covering the reigns of Ivan the Terrible and his two successors. They necessarily lose much of their quality in translation. This does not apply to the work of Maxim Gorki (1868-1936).

His real name was Alexey Peshkov, but he wrote under the pseudonym of Gorki, which means 'the bitter.' He was the son of a shoemaker and born at Nishni-Novgorod, now re-christened after him. At the age of twelve he ran away as assistant cook on a Volga steamer and was taught to read by his drunken superior. Then he became by turns a draughtsman, a painter of ikons, a clerk, and an employee in a salt works. He earned fame as a short story writer and was elected to the Imperial Academy, but the authorities would not ratify the choice. He was arrested for his revolutionary activities, went for a while to the United States and, having long suffered from consumption, spent most of his later years at Capri and Sorrento.

He wrote various plays, but the others pale into insignificance beside the naturalistic drama, *The Lower Depths*. The plot is very slight. The scene passes in a common doss-house, where a woman dies of consumption. A young thief is in love with the owner of the place. He wearies of her and wishes to marry her younger sister. The wife promises him money if he will rid her of her husband whom she loathes. Her jealousy of her sister breaks out and she and her husband beat the girl. In a fury the thief kills the man, but the wife declares he has done it to gain the money she had promised him. The sister believes this and runs away in despair, the supposition being that she will end up on the streets. The thief meanwhile is arrested for manslaughter. There is, following the manner of the German naturalistic playwrights, no building up to a climax and no decisive ending.

The awakening of the thief's better self is brought about by an old compassionate pilgrim, a mere tramp, who holds that God exists if you believe in Him. He tells the dying woman of rest beyond the grave and the drunken actor of a non-existent place where he can be cured of alcoholism for nothing. He bids the thief turn honest and seek a living with the girl in Siberia. Then he disappears, having accomplished nothing. The woman dies, still frightened, the thief goes to jail, the actor hangs himself in despair. But the faith in human nature survives.

All the characters are hardened by misfortune. They think and talk of their own interests, unmoved by what goes on about them. Dominating them all is Satine, a cheat and a drunkard. Yet from his lips and amid this appalling squalor there comes—when he is slightly tipsy—a passionate declaration of belief in man. The pilgrim's tales are well enough, he says, for weaklings, but Satine, the bad lot, stands on his own unsteady feet and proclaims his unconquerable faith in the human



spirit. There is true greatness in that, enhanced by the terrible realism of the setting and the depravity of the sordid folk it frames. Gorki knew such places as this and he shows it with all its vileness and yet with redeeming optimism. The play is impressive enough to read : with Satine acted by Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre, of which he was joint founder with Nyemirovitch-Dantchenko, the effect of the piece must have been stupendous.

It is often said that nothing happens in the plays of Anton Tchekhov (1860-1904). This is partially true of *The Cherry Orchard*, the most difficult of his plays to appreciate to the full. Here there is no physical violence, merely the selling of a cherished family estate, rendered necessary by the hopeless ineptitude and dreaminess of the owners. But this is a crisis in the family life, not an ordinary feature of it. Each of the other pieces contains a pistol shot and that, as Mr. George Calderon points out in the shrewd preface to his translation of the plays is hardly an everyday occurrence even in Russian households !

In *The Seagull*, for instance, a young man, Constantine, writes a play, a skit on the decadents, for private performance before his mother, a celebrated actress, who is paying him a visit with her lover Trigórin, a popular novelist. The performance is a failure. Nina, who has played the chief part, falls in love with Trigórin and when he goes back to Moscow she follows him. Constantine, with whom she had been in love, is left behind and by the end of two years he is beginning to make his way as a writer. Nina, meanwhile, has a baby of which Trigórin is the father. The infant dies and the novelist goes back to Constantine's mother, with whom he returns once more on a visit to the country. Nina, too, arrives surreptitiously and tells Constantine that she is still in love with Trigórin and that her sufferings have made her a great actress. Constantine had hoped

to win her back. When she has gone, he tears up all his manuscripts, which he can see are only second-rate, and shoots himself.

In *The Three Sisters* we have the girls and their brother longing to get back to Moscow where they had once lived. The eldest becomes a school teacher and finds some purpose in life, though not the one she was seeking. The second decides to marry an officer. When he retires they will settle down contentedly to some kind of social work, but at the last moment, almost casually, it seems, he is killed in a duel. The third sister is unhappily married to a dull school teacher. She falls in love with a colonel and he with her. But he, too, is married. Then his regiment is transferred elsewhere and they say good-bye. The brother had hoped to be a professor. But he marries a commonplace woman and has to make shift with a seat on the local town council. All are frustrated.

*Uncle Vanya* depicts the chaos wrought in a home by the disturbing beauty of a retired professor's young wife. The professor exasperates the whole household and one of them goes so far as to attempt to shoot him. Eventually the couple go away, but the old placid life of the family is irretrievably destroyed.

These brief summaries show that there is no lack of incident in Tchekhov's plays. Nevertheless the plot is not the mainspring of his work, far from it. The essential point to realise is that there are no villains and no heroes in these pieces. Most plays deal with a conflict of wills or the struggle of good against evil. The naturalistic playwrights did not write on these lines, but their work was wanting in dramatic quality. Tchekhov, on the other hand, was a consummate craftsman and his plays expressed a new and original view. It is for this reason that he is outstanding among Russian dramatists with an influence extending far beyond his own country.

Briefly, it may be said that he believed suffering to be caused without evil intention. It is the result of conditions beyond the control of any single individual. Suffering may certainly be brought about by the action of individuals, but, for the most part, unwittingly. Ordinary folk are seldom patterns of virtue or monsters of vice. Galsworthy got away from the villain and hero by saying that suffering was the fault of society. Tchekhov does not take this way of escape. For him the channels of evil are often innocent, even lovable.

*The Seagull*, the easiest of his plays to understand, illustrates this very fully. Trigorin, who ruins Nina and drives Constantine to suicide, is an attractive and charming person. His love of beauty and Nina's appealing youthfulness make him respond to her advances. Had he been a strong, silent man, he would have put her in her place. But, being only human and perverse, like the rest of us, he yielded and disaster followed. The real enemy is life itself.

Few single characters stand out in these plays. All are opposed to life which seems to range itself against them. Everybody is looking for something and few get it. Yet Tchekhov is not exactly a pessimist. His plays are not tragedies, but comedies which take a sombre turn, because we attach so much importance to our own desires. There are many passages which are meant to arouse laughter, though in English productions these lines are not always made the most of. The crises and suicides are not caused deliberately but—and here we get an echo of the German naturalists—by the cumulative tragedy of ordinary life.

Each person in a Tchekhov play has his own problem. That is why the characters pursue their own thoughts, often ignoring remarks addressed to them and lending a deceptive air of inconsequence to the dialogue. This is increased by the fact that some speeches are intended to convey atmosphere, others to explain the action and

others again to disclose the inner thoughts of the speaker. For this reason too, Tchekhov, though a realist, employs the soliloquy. The characters voice their own thoughts and, since their thoughts are more important than their actions, it is natural that they should speak freely of themselves.

Tchekhov's method is an elusive one. It is far easier to write a play with good and evil personified in two opposed characters. There is a danger of dullness in Tchekhov's manner, for his people are weaklings. This snare he avoided, because he was a master of his craft. *Musical Chairs* by the late Ronald Mackenzie and *Strange Orchestra* by Rodney Ackland both show his influence. Tchekhov opened a new road to the dramatist and walked along it unflinching. It is a difficult one to follow.

Under the Soviet régime there is enormous theatrical activity. The drama is subsidised all over the country, with permanent theatres on the collective farms and performances in forty different dialects. Actors, producer and audience meet together to discuss or criticise plays, most of which deal with the mass of the people and not with limited types as in capitalist countries. Apart from regular theatres there are at least 8,000 open air stages and 35,000 village clubs in which performances are given. Plays, at the moment of writing, are still subject to censorship. The theatre is a cultural and social force and has little in common with the commercial theatre of Western Europe. Methods of production are at present more interesting than the plays themselves, which are for the most part too propagandist to have any great appeal outside the country. The leading producers are Tairov, Granovski and Lunacharski. The chief playwrights, Bulgakov (*The Day of the Turbins*), Ivanov (*The Armoured Train*) and Pogodin (*The Aristocrats*). Love of the theatre is inborn in the Russian. Even during the Revolution

the theatres were crowded. With all this sustained interest and activity it can only be a question of time before dramatists show themselves whose work is on a level with the high standard set by the Russian producers.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE EXPRESSIONISTS

HAUPTMANN and Strindberg, finding their imagination unsatisfied by naturalistic plays, both experimented with expressionistic drama. These two forms are violently opposed to one another. Both are extreme and each has therefore been subjected to a good deal of criticism. Naturalism has been condemned because, to quote Mr. J. W. Marriott: 'It is based upon superficial observation of detail—a mere photography: but expressionism has been likened to an X-ray photograph.'

This comparison is apt. Expressionists, like the majority of playwrights, are profoundly interested in psychology. In a sense all drama is founded on psychology, but there is a vast difference between the naturalistic and the expressionistic methods. In ordinary realistic plays the workings of the mind are revealed through speech and action. But this involves the acceptance of a convention. It pre-supposes a lucidity of mind that the average man, or indeed any man, does not possess.

Speech does not invariably reveal the working of the mind. It is frequently a cloak for thought, sometimes because a man is deliberately concealing or disguising his feelings, more often because, especially in moments of crisis, he does not fully understand himself. Few of us are sufficiently rational and introspective to know exactly why we think or act in a particular manner. There are dozens of contradictory emotions within us. We are aware of some, but we ignore or are even ignorant of

others. Furthermore, there are those hidden and inscrutable emotions, which are the products of the subconscious mind.

Obviously the naturalistic method, with its faithful observation and dispassionate recording of externals, is powerless to reveal the mental process of so complex, inconsistent and perhaps unconsciously secretive a creature as man. That at all events is the view of the expressionists and there is a good deal to be said for it. Naturalism is objective. Expressionism deals with the subjective, with inner realities. It attempts, in a word, to dramatise the inner life of man, to represent what is passing in his soul.

To do this in the novel is sufficiently difficult. Proust is a leading and successful exponent. But to do the same in drama is impossible without breaking away altogether from realistic representation.

The expressionist seeks to solve the problem by representing the soul of man in the form of external symbols. He uses metaphor, fable or allegory. He produces figures moving obscurely on a darkened stage to personify good or bad motives. He gives words to unseen voices to express the secret thoughts of a man's mind. He summons the producer to his aid and represents a brain-storm in the mind of a financier (*Lean Harvest* by Ronald Jeans) by flickering lights, eerie noises and the reiteration of the same few words in louder and louder tones.

The old dramatists wrote plays of individual tragedies and emotions. They depicted a conflict of wills, a struggle between heroes and villains. With Ibsen social problems came to the stage, but he exposed them to the audience through the words and actions of realistic characters. Galsworthy blamed society not individuals for evils and injustices. Nevertheless he too chose realistic and individual characters to serve as representatives of a class or profession. We know their age,

appearance, habits, individual turns of phrase. They are carefully observed. When Galsworthy wishes, as in *The Forest*, to portray a shady financier, he does so realistically. 'Adrian Bastaple is a man with a thick trunk and rather short neck, iron-grey hair once dark, subfusc rather olive complexion, and heavy-lidded eyes with power in them. He may be sixty-five, and wears a frock coat and a dark cravat of the nineties, with a pearl pin. He speaks without accent, but with a slight thickness of voice, as if he were lined with leather.' Could any description be more realistic and detailed? Bastaple may stand for a typical unscrupulous financier, but he is an individual. He is a single particularised illustration of a generality.

The expressionists have no use for this photographic method. They are not concerned with individuals at all. They write of capitalism, industrialism, and so forth, but they make no attempt to personify any one of these in a realistic guise, to make one individual typical of a class and serve as a particular instance of a general argument or truth. They have, for the most part, no quarrel with individuals but only with systems. Their personages are devoid of individuality. They have no background or personal character. We know nothing of them as human beings. They are anonymous—'the father, the son, the dreamer, a workman' and so on. In order to illustrate the tyranny of capitalism and the ruthlessness of high finance, they do not show a particular business man cynically carrying through a shady deal in his office. Instead the scene discloses a number of anonymous stockbrokers in top hats and spats, calling out prices in unison round a tape machine and breaking into a dance to the accompaniment of a jazz band. Devices of this kind convey a very strong impression, but sometimes—and this is a real danger to the expressionists—an unintentionally humorous one.

This substitution of symbolic types for individual



human beings has caused a change in dialogue. The expressionist does not attempt realistic conversation. Sometimes his characters are rhetorical. They burst into song or speak verse. They break into a chanting repetition of a single phrase so as to convey the idea of the monotony or dreariness of life. It is often very effective. It is a new technique. There is seldom much form about an expressionistic piece. It consists usually of a series of short scenes with a stylised or symbolical setting intended to reveal the inner significance of the play.

The Germans have carried expressionism further than any other dramatists. They would condemn the using of an individual instance as an illustration of a universal truth. Nevertheless from a glance at one or two single plays it may be possible to give a clearer idea of expressionistic drama than from general theorising.

Georg Kaiser, an electrical engineer by profession, born at Magdeburg, in 1878, produced shortly after the War one of the best known expressionist plays. This was *Gas*. The scene is laid in and near a factory which produces a new gas from which all the motive power for industry is derived. The original inventor became a multi-millionaire and has handed control over to his son, a visionary, who runs the factory on profit sharing lines. In the opening scene, the 'gentleman in white,' presumably symbolising the idea of destruction, comes to the factory. Immediately after he has gone the gas in the tubes changes from white to red and there is an appalling explosion in which hundreds of workmen are killed. The survivors demand the punishment of the chief engineer. The owner points out that the formula was perfect, the engineer's calculations correct, and that, notwithstanding all this, the explosion had occurred. He tells them that this is a salutary warning and bids them cease to be machines and return to lead

lives more worthy of humanity in working on the land. But big business firms, dependent for their power on this gas, are in danger of being forced to close down and the various owners threaten to take over the concern themselves, unless the millionaire's son resumes operations at once. At length the workmen, despite the recent disaster and the certainty of its ultimate recurrence call upon the engineer, whom they had recently been threatening, to lead them back to the works and the owner is left powerless.

The theme really is the domination of man by machines of his own devising, a subject also dealt with in the 'robot' play *R.U.R.*, by the Czecho-Slovakian dramatist, Karl Capek, which is to some extent expressionistic. *Gas* is a symbolic drama, the characters having no individuality and no names other than 'Woman, The Mother, or the Captain.'

Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight* (1916) is more expressionistic. This shows the adventures of a junior bank clerk who, his senses stirred by the perfume of a lady's glove, embezzles a large sum, leaves his humdrum home and lavishes his money on the frequenters of dance-halls, race-meetings and gambling hells until midnight. Then seeing in all only a cheat and a delusion, he commits suicide to escape capture. It is the theme of *The Rake's Progress* or an old morality play but unfolded in a new manner. It is profoundly pessimistic. That too is characteristic of expressionist drama.

Ernst Toller, born in 1893, shares Kaiser's hatred of mechanical civilisation and expressed it in *The Machine Wreckers*, a play dealing, like Harold Brighouse's *The Northerners*, though in a very different way, with the Luddite riots. His best play, though, is *Masses and Men*, produced in 1931, but first written during his imprisonment in 1919 for his part in the Munich revolt of that year, when a Soviet union of

Bavaria was proclaimed in opposition to the Weimar constitution. Toller is a propagandist who holds capitalism responsible for the miseries of humanity in war and in peace. The 'Woman' of the play represents the human soul, urged on by dreams, strong in thought but weak in deed, groping through darkness and despair towards vision. The play is divided alternately into real and dream pictures, but there is so little local detail that the whole thing is really visionary. The author prescribes a vague setting conveying the idea of light and space with music, bizarre, ghostly or soothing to link up the various episodes.

In this piece 'woman' takes part in a revolt against capitalism. Her husband, a business man, appeals to her to renounce her ideas. Though she loves him, she refuses, preferring to adhere to the Cause. Then follows a caustic interlude of bankers profiteering in munitions and organised vice, which ends with a fox-trot, a kind of dance of death, while the masses sing of their wrongs. They proclaim a strike, but their leader, the 'Nameless One' calls for a revolution and a war against war. The 'woman' appeals against bloodshed, but is over-ruled and one, symbolising her husband, is shot by the sentries. In the next picture the news of the workers' war against capitalism grows worse, and the 'Nameless One,' who represents the masses, urges continuance of the struggle. The woman protests and, after a final interview with the 'Nameless One' she is shot. So the play closes with the implication that force is always wrong.

Other German writers of expressionist plays were Sorge (*The Beggar*), Brecht (*Drums by Night*) Kornfeld (*The Seduction*) and Göring (*The Battle of Jutland*). In England various playwrights have dabbled in expressionism, Sean O'Casey in *Within the Gates* and C. K. Munro in *The Rumour*, among them. Neither

of these pieces is extravagantly expressionistic, however. Nor is *The Insect Play* by the brothers Capek, a pessimistic allegory of human life in which the insects represents different types of people.

Few expressionist dramatists pay much attention to form. The works of some are chaotic, hysterical and apparently meaningless. Symbols can be an illuminating silent commentary on life. But what is the significance of a parrot which suddenly explodes and rises to Heaven in the form of a pink cloud? What are we to make of a millionaire who, envying his secretary's more fortunate childhood, murders him so as to steal that happy childhood for himself?

Many people dislike Epstein, modern music and surrealism. Expressionistic drama is equally suspect. At the same time no one can positively assert that there is no trace of good in it, though there is certainly more solid justification than mere conservatism for looking askance at it. For one thing many of the plays were written under the influence of Freud's researches into the subconscious and the reliability of these is questionable. At all events it is difficult to make them convincing ingredients of drama. Again, nearly all expressionistic plays contain a large proportion of abnormal people and this fact, coupled with their pessimistic tone, tends to make them wearisome as well as dreary. Furthermore the writers are mostly communists, heretics and pacifists, passionately devoted to some particular cause and in arms, apparently on principle, against convention and authority. They have a perfect right to their views, but it is disconcerting to find them almost unanimous in the opinion that life is fundamentally rotten. The expressionists claim to reveal the inner soul of man, but why should they find there nothing except triviality or tragedy? It is surely a hopelessly biased view and it is legitimate therefore to be doubtful of the permanent value of the drama

which prompts it. Finally there is the lack of form. That, as much as all these other objections, has caused pure expressionism to lose ground to the same degree as extreme naturalism against which it was a reaction.

This does not mean that there is no merit in expressionism. Dramatists are willing to take from it its symbolism and to graft that on to realistic dialogue. Fantasy, too, may owe much to it. As a movement it has been of value. 'This dramatic infant,' as Mr. Frank Vernon points out in 'The Twentieth Century Theatre,' 'must not be strangled at birth: if it is sociological it is serious, and the tendency in London to escape from seriousness to French farce or to English country-house comedy is pusillanimous.'

First rate expressionistic plays have come from the pen of Mr. Tyrone Guthrie, the actor and producer. *The Squirrel's Cage* is a skilful presentation of the aimlessness of civilised life. An enterprising spinster tries to persuade her married brother to allow his son to strike out for himself. But all initiative in the boy is stifled. He grows up, becomes a City man like his father, marries and has a son who will in process of time be guided along the same rigid unadventurous path as himself. Short interludes in the form of fragments of conversations on a school playing field and in a City train re-enforce the impression of monotony. In *The Flowers are not for You to Pick*, a young parson is wrecked on his way to a foreign mission and, as he is drowning, his past life flashes through his mind. These fleeting visions provide the substance of the play. His first recollection is being told, as a baby, not to pick flowers in the garden. The incident is symbolic of his whole career. It recurs as a constant refrain. The flowers are never for him. He is stupid and stutters. His brothers laugh at him. He is a butt of his fellows at school. His announcement that he intends to be a parson is greeted with mirth. He

falls in love with a girl who does not care about him, and disappoints his father by entering the Church. His vicar prefers a more muscular Christian to him, and, feeling himself a misfit, he sails for China only to be drowned ignominiously on the way, fragments of these several episodes all flashing through his thoughts in the last deliberately chaotic scene. In the third play, *Matrimonial News*, the whole action takes place in the mind of a shopgirl who, sick of living with her mother at home, has put an advertisement in a matrimonial paper and is nervously waiting for the arrival of the man who has answered it. The speeches are incoherent and inconsequent, expressing thereby her mental perturbation as she waits with echoes of her daily life passing continuously through her mind.

In all these plays the expressionistic method succeeds admirably in revealing the innermost and often confused thoughts of various people. All three too have dramatic force. But all three—and this is the point—were written not for stage production but for broadcasting. They are free from the ludicrous or unconvincing effect frequently made by attempts at the visible representation of elusive states of mind. They allow the imagination of the listener free scope, and the incongruities or absurdities inseparable from the stage production of such plays are avoided. Partial expressionism may and does find a place in the theatre. But the proper medium of pure expressionism is probably the broadcast play.

## CHAPTER XVI

### SOME MODERN CONTINENTAL PLAYWRIGHTS

THESIS plays lack characterisation. Naturalistic plays are deficient in construction. The French have always shown a deep interest in psychology and a keen sense of form. Many French dramatists of the present century have therefore devoted themselves to writing well-fashioned plays dealing with the analysis of the emotions. And love, naturally enough, has taken the first place. There is seldom a sub-plot and the action is no more than is required to reveal emotions or development of character.

Among the writers who specialised in the portrayal of love was Porto-Riche, who regarded it rather as a fever than as an inspiration. Sometimes he strikes a fantastic note, as for instance in a piece in which a young wife dresses up as a man and sings serenades outside her own window so as to make her husband jealous. In another play he turns high-comedy to tragedy and shows the consequences of a father and son both falling in love with the same woman. More often he is slightly cynical. He writes of a wife who supervises her husband's flirtations in order to prevent him making a complete fool of himself. In *L'Amoureuse* he depicts an intelligent man who has married for the sake of domestic comfort. He finds his wife's affection disconcerting and is extremely relieved when she leaves him and allows him to get on with his work in peace.

Henry Bataille is more poignant, particularly in *La Femme Nue*. Here an artist's model has shared his life

during years of struggle. On the eve of achieving fame he marries her. Then he becomes a fashionable portrait painter and his wife is unable to acquire the social graces appropriate to their new condition. He falls in love with a rich woman and the wife, after a desperate attempt to regain his affections, consents to a divorce and shoots herself. He is conscience-stricken, but love is dead and, when she recovers, he goes off again and she is left to the care of a middle-aged painter who has been fond of her for years. It is a highly dramatic piece bearing the stamp of truth.

The same theme is found in *Mélo* by Henri Bernstein, who for many years has written plays for the *Gymnase*. His comedy *Promise* was recently seen in London, but his best work is *Samson*, written as long ago as 1908. In this piece a bluff, self-made business man has married a young girl of noble and impoverished family. He is deeply in love with her, but she is captivated by an experienced seducer of her own social class. The husband finds out and persuades the other to invest all his money in a company of which he holds the majority of the shares. He then manipulates the market so that his wife's would-be betrayer is ruined. But so is he. His wife meanwhile has come to her senses and, touched by her husband's devotion in destroying his business for her sake, she consents to leave the vicious circle in which she has moved and make a fresh start with him elsewhere. Told thus badly it sounds unconvincing, but the character drawing saves the play from melodramatic improbability.

Jean-Jacques Bernard is another psychological writer. Outstanding among his works is *Martine*, which, though it does not end in a suicide, reminds one of Galsworthy's short story *The Apple Tree*. It is very simple. A young man of good position comes to stay with a relation in a tiny village. He is not a philanderer, but, with no one else to talk to, he turns to the peasant girl, Martine.



It is the lightest of flirtations on his side, a passionate attachment on hers. Even so, her reason tells her that nothing can come of it and she makes no protest when he marries a girl as well educated as himself. She resigns herself to wedding a solid peasant and conscientiously makes him a good wife. This piece might easily have become banal. Instead it is in the highest degree moving and true to life.

The plays of Alfred Capus generally present a wider problem than one of purely personal relationships. This is particularly the case with *The Two Men* (1908). In this an ambitious provincial lawyer comes with his wife to Paris to stay with one of her relatives. She falls in love with a young man she meets there, but gives him no encouragement. Then her husband succumbs to the influence of a financier, who offers him a post and the opportunity to get rich by legal but questionable means. His wife begs him to return to the honest obscurity of Dijon. The lure is too strong, however, and he is swept into the financier's circle and takes up with an attractive woman of dubious character, knowing in his heart that he is forfeiting something better. Then only does the wife decide to divorce him and follow her own inclination. The play is a study of two men who represent two conflicting standards of honour.

The emotion analysed in the work of H. R. Lenormand is different. He is at his best in writing of unsuccessful people and in *Les Ratés* he has made a penetrating study of an actor and actress, whose ambition is greater than their attainments and who go down hill, while yet retaining an intermittent affection for one another despite the depths to which they sink. It is a tragic, rather sordid, but brilliant play.

The War called forth, as in England, pieces of very varied type. There is Maurice Raynal's *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* which has only four characters. Here a French soldier on a few hours leave before undertaking

a mission, which is bound to prove fatal, takes his fill of love and, when the girl's father reproaches him, he accuses him of a jealous desire to retain the girl's devotion for himself. War is terrible and absurd, love a flower to be plucked in the shadow of death. Yet there is no propaganda. The play is one of emotional situations presented with beauty and restraint. Then there is *Siegfried* by Jean Giraudoux, a symbolic piece showing patriotism and love triumphing over the lure of political power. The chief character is a Frenchman who loses his memory and is taken for a German. His fiancée recognises him and slowly his memory returns. In the end he throws up a brilliant political position in Germany and goes back with her to his native land. In *The Man I Killed* Maurice Rostand takes for his hero a young Frenchman who cannot get out of his thoughts the face of a German soldier whom he killed in the war. To regain his peace of mind he seeks out the parents intending to confess and ask their forgiveness. They take him for a friend of their dead son and he cannot bring himself to deceive them. Eventually he falls in love with the dead man's fiancée and she finds out his secret. She masters her first feeling of revulsion and goes through with the wedding, leaving the parents still in ignorance of the truth. It is an interesting play but rather too obviously an exposure of the futility of war and a plea for better Franco-German relations.

*Human Flesh* by Henry Bataille is an episodic piece. In the first act a young man, shortly about to be married, takes leave of the working girl who has borne him a son. Twenty years later, during the War, he has become an important government contractor and, bowing to his wife's wishes, uses his influence to keep his legitimate son out of the danger zone. His former mistress, now a middle-aged woman whom he has not seen for years, comes to inform him that her son has been killed in action. He is filled with grief and shame and tells his

lawful son of the other's gallant death. The boy's patriotism is roused and he secures his transfer to an active service unit. Before the end of the war the father confesses his early indiscretion to his wife and she sentimentalises over the dead son saying that, had he lived, she would have welcomed him into the family circle. When, however, it transpires that he has not been killed, she finds the idea less attractive and the natural son, sensing the position, goes back to live with his mother. It is an ironical comedy.

A similar incident figures in *The Merchants of Glory* by Marcel Pagnol and Paul Nivoix, which satirises the profiteers who exploit the bravery of the dead. On the strength of the reputation of his son, reported heroically killed in action, a man stands for Parliament. The son returns alive, but is at length prevailed upon to remain officially dead for the sake of others. He changes his name and becomes secretary to his father who is now a cabinet minister. In each act is shown a portrait of the supposedly dead hero, which grows larger and more imposing with every change of scene. At the close all the characters bow reverently before a huge one without recognising the original in their midst. Rebuked for failing to take off his hat like the rest, he murmurs: 'Excuse me! My emotion! I knew him so well!'

Pagnol is better known by his comedies, *Marius* and *Topaze*. The former deals with a Marseilles bar-tender who is prevented from seeing the world by his love for a girl. The latter is a richly comic work about a school-master who, discharged for failing to amend a tactlessly accurate report, turns at first unwittingly and then deliberately to dishonesty and becomes an influential person. It is a satire with a substratum of truth. Whether because of our optimism or because of our hypocrisy, the play was not a success in London, where satirical pieces can seldom be certain of a welcome.

There is satire, too, though more of light-hearted

farce, in such plays as *Dr. Knock*, in which Jules Romains shows a doctor, who has bought a worthless country practice, convincing the robust population of a whole village that they are ill. Equally amusing is his *M. Trouhadec Seized by Dissipation*.

Sacha Guitry's touch is even lighter. He will never be a great playwright, but he has an original turn of fancy, he writes excellent dialogue and is wholly incapable of being dull. He is audacious but without offence (*The Night Watchman*). *Mariette* is a charming piece about an actress who has a short-lived affair with the future Napoleon III. Interviewed in extreme old age by newspaper men she conjures from her unreliable memory the most astounding recollections which justify the sub-title: *How History is written*. Of the other writers of comedies Georges Courteline is remembered by pieces dealing with barrack-room life and the absurdities of the law, Edouard Bourdet by his study of post-war manners, *The Weaker Sex*, and Mme. Germaine Acremant by her delightful picture of the havoc wrought in a pious spinster circle by the arrival of a sprightly and vivacious Parisienne (*Ces Dames aux Chapeaux Verts*).

An interesting writer is Pierre Hamp. In *La Compagnie* an engine driver is censured for refusing to endanger the passengers' lives by taking out a faultily repaired locomotive. When, however, owing to the weakness of the permanent way, an accident happens to a holiday train bound for a new resort in which the Company is interested, the directors save their faces by accusing him of negligence. The play has something of the impartiality of Galsworthy, but the danger to society of vested interests is clearly apparent. In *The Lion's Meal* by François de Curel, on the other hand, capitalism is justified and a reformer decides that the best way of serving the workmen is to become an industrialist and show men how to enlarge the scope of their desires, so that they may have more things on which to

spend money and therefore labour the harder to get it.

There is no space to add to this list of French playwrights. During the last few years the quality of the pieces staged in the commercial theatre in France has deteriorated. The growth of the cosmopolitan population, financial difficulties and the competition of the cinema are, no doubt, mainly responsible. But there is enormous amateur or semi-professional activity, and work of real value has resulted from the efforts of Jacques Copeau and others associated with the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* and similar ventures.

The keynote is simplicity in technique and production. Certain plays of Bernard and Lenormand are written in this new idiom. So also is *Noah* of André Obey which is characterised by humour, delicacy and primitive simplicity. It has classic purity of form without stiltedness or inhumanity. Another playwright of the school is Charles Vildrac who has the same gift of making silence eloquent and of getting his effects through restraint amounting almost to understatement. He is adept at expressing spontaneous feeling arising from a natural not stage-made situation. In *Michel Auclair* a bookseller, returning to his native town after a year in Paris, finds that his sweetheart has married a stupid, dishonest and blustering soldier. There are no recriminations or noisy confrontations. After a severe inward struggle the bookseller devotes himself, for the sake of the girl, to reforming the character of her husband. In *The S. S. Tenacity* two ex-soldiers, waiting to take ship for Canada to seek their fortunes, fall in love with a pretty waitress at their inn. One elopes with her, while his dreamier companion is still thinking about it. Then, since the girl wishes to stay in France, the other sets out stoically by himself. That is all. Lenormand's plays, inspired largely by interest in the Freudian psychology of sex, are more grim, but the method of handling is the same. These writers are concerned with the life of the individual

rather than with that of society and the action of their plays is mental and emotional rather than external.

Religious idealism is revealed in the work of the French diplomat, Paul Claudel. In *The Hostage*, set in the period after the Revolution, the heroine, into whose care the Pope is committed, can only save his life by breaking her engagement to the man she loves and wedding a ruffian, who has killed her parents and the monks of the abbey where she sought refuge. She saves her rascally husband from the vengeance of her former fiancé at the cost of her own life and dies without being able to disclose to him the motives of her self sacrifice. The same note of abnegation is dominant in *The Tidings brought to Mary*, in which Violaine, who has contracted leprosy from a kiss of forgiveness and been ousted from her lover's affections by her sister, withdraws to a life of devotion in the forest. There, long after, she performs the miracle of raising her sister's child from the dead by breathing into it her own pure spirit. Only as she dies does her former lover learn of her innocence and devotion. Both plays are set down in free verse and beautifully rhythmic prose.

The Belgian, Maurice Maeterlinck, born in 1862, shows in much of his work a like idealism. He began with romantic plays, akin to Arthurian legend, but fraught with a sense of impending doom. Other plays, dealing mainly with the approach of death are a mixture of fantasy and symbolism. *Pelléas and Mélisande* is a dramatised fairy tale with a tragic ending. In *Monna Vanna* the characters, for the first time in Maeterlinck's writing, are realistic. The period is that of Renaissance Italy and the problem to be solved whether a wife is justified in sacrificing her honour to save a starving city. Maeterlinck implied an affirmative answer, but revised his view in his Biblical drama *Mary Magdalene*, in which a Roman tribune offers to save Jesus from execution if she will yield herself to him. But she refuses, since

to consent would be to give the lie to all she has learned from Our Lord.

The most popular of Maeterlinck's works is the allegorical children's play, *The Blue Bird*, the moral of which is that happiness, though it cannot be permanently enjoyed, may after much seeking elsewhere, be found at home by an act of unselfishness. In *The Power of the Dead* he developed an idea, suggested in the previous play, that our ancestors live again only as we think of them. Claudel is an orthodox Catholic, Maeterlinck a mystical philosopher. In his war play *The Burgomaster of Stilemonde* and *The Cloud that Lifted*, a study of morbid mental repression, Maeterlinck reverted to realism. But it is by his earlier plays, despite their occasionally cloying sentimentality, that he is probably destined to be best remembered.

Sentiment not sentimentality characterises the work of Spain's most popular contemporary dramatists, the brothers Serafin and Joaquín Quintero, who have written some fifty plays in collaboration. They do not use the complicated intrigue of old Spanish comedy. Nor are they profound thinkers. Their outlook is optimistic, if a trifle sceptical, their language ordinary without being trite or banal. They are good humoured and sympathetic, and seem all the time to be taking the audience into their confidence. The setting is generally that of their native Andalusia. This is true of *The Women have their Way*, where a young Madrid lawyer brought to a small provincial town on legal business, is pronounced by the local gossips to have fallen in love with one of the inhabitants, whom actually he barely knows. All his denials are unavailing and at length he begins to find the idea not unattractive. In the end, of course, the women's assertion is made good.

Equally slight and just as pleasant is *The Lady from Alfaceque*. Here a Madrid lawyer's wife, who dispenses hospitality to anyone connected with her beloved native

village, gives lodging for three weeks to a young man who pretends to be in serious trouble, only to learn that he has played the same trick elsewhere. She is very angry, but he adroitly saves himself by saying that he had only begged shelter so as to have leisure to write a poem on Alfaqueque. He is still reciting it to a more or less convinced audience at the fall of the curtain.

*Fortunato*, outwardly just as farcical, has an undercurrent of seriousness. He is an honest man in desperate financial straits, but he lacks the art of the successful beggar. So he is turned away from the house of an architect who would have helped him, had he not just been victimised by a plausible rogue. Almost frantic, Fortunato is tempted to rob a blind man, but cannot bring himself to do it and finally, though naturally cowardly, he finds work with a lady sharpshooter who outlines his body in bullets against a board. Farce and pathos here are closely allied. We laugh at Fortunato but we are fond of him and therein lies the secret of the authors' widespread appeal.

*A Hundred Years Old* has the same intimate charm. It deals solely with the celebrations attendant upon an old man's hundredth birthday. We see the reunion of his whole family rich and poor, his serenity, his entirely lovable character and his pleasure when an engagement gives him the hope of seeing the beginning of yet another generation before he dies. There is plenty of sentiment, but there is wholesome comedy as well. The Quinteros have no significant message, but their plays are neither propagandist nor mawkish. They are a welcome offset to austere and alarmingly intellectual drama. They are artistic representations of certain aspects of Spanish life, and also of life in general, since they treat of eternal qualities. In Seville a fountain with stone benches and bookshelves containing their plays stands in their honour. No monument could be more pleasant or more appropriate.



The same charming sentiment pervades the lighter pieces of Martínez Sierra, born at Madrid in 1881. In *The Romantic Young Lady*, for instance, the heroine finds romance through a straw hat blown into her room on a windy night. The novelist, who comes to retrieve it, gives her a letter of recommendation for a secretarial post and, when she applies, she finds that her prospective employer is none other than the writer of the letter. There are jealousies, followed by a second entry of the volatile straw hat and this time the novelist proposes when he comes to fetch it, while the girl's grandmother tactfully dozes in her chair. Equally light is *Wife to a Famous Man*, wherein an orator, grown vain because he has won an air race, disdains his wife and goes off with a singer. But he is back a week later with a bandaged head to beg forgiveness.

There is fantasy in some of Sierra's work, but he is not afraid to write tender but serious comedy. His finest play is *The Kingdom of God*, which depicts three stages in the life of a lay sister, first as a nurse in a home for old men, secondly as a helper in a hospital for unmarried mothers and lastly, forty years later, as matron in charge of an orphanage. She is neither a martyr nor a weakling, but a woman happy in her chosen calling. The play is a realistic character study without a trace of false sentimentality. Just as touching is *The Two Shepherds*, in which an old parson and a doctor, learned only in the knowledge of human nature, are superseded by younger and academically better qualified men.

Jacinto Benavente, born in 1866, is a far more difficult dramatist to describe, for in his 80 pieces he has experimented with every kind of play. He is more of a cosmopolitan than most Spanish dramatists, perhaps because he grew up at a time when Spain, shorn of her possessions, was realising that the old pride and honour were inadequate weapons with which to compete with a changing and mercenary world. Not that he finds the new rulers

superior to the old. On the contrary he gibes freely at dishonesty and especially at corrupt politicians. But though he satirises them, together with the frequenters of fashionable Riviera hotels, he does so with the urbanity of a man of the world. He is immensely versatile. Sometimes he will produce airy little pieces with a moral. Such is *The Bonds of Interest*, in which he harks back to old Italian comedy in order to comment on the mixture of good and evil qualities in man. In this play of intrigue Leander stands for the unschooled best in man and Crispin, his servant, for the one who faces the facts of life.

Others of his pieces are studies of provincial manners. To this type belongs *The Evil Doers of Good*. In this the leading place is given to a group of women reformers who are virtuous and narrow-minded. They do what they think is good for people and take no account of their feelings. The plea for personal liberty is put into the mouth of a *raisonneur*, a dissipated old aristocrat, whose own unhappy 'arranged' marriage has caused him to go to seed. He engineers the elopement of two humble lovers, and a young girl, herself a victim of a union of convenience, aids them to a happiness which cannot be hers.

Unique in Benavente's varied output is the Freudian drama *La Malquerida* (*The Passion Flower*). This is a grim play about a man who falls in love with his step-daughter. His wife finds out and he shoots her. The originality lies in the fact that the girl herself, without knowing it, or at least acknowledging it, is really in love with him, too, though she systematically scorns him. This play illustrates Benavente's interest in the duality, the mingled good and evil, of human nature, which figures in so many of his pieces. Society is either a partner or a hostile force in nearly all his plays and he chooses for his starting point the moment when an individual under the stress of some emotion ceases to be conventional. He gives a large place in his work to women whom he sees by

their sacrifice and readiness to forgive as far nobler than men. He is a realist but, as with other Spaniards, his realism is tinged with romance and local colour. His plays are often loosely constructed and some of them read better than they act. For long he was little known outside Spain. The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1922 made him an international figure.

The Sicilian, Luigi Pirandello, (1867-1936) took to the drama comparatively late in life, having previously written numerous novels and short stories. His outlook is pessimistic, his plays largely philosophic, his work often extremely obscure. He maintains that there is a great difference between what we ought to be, what other people think of us, and what we actually are, of which last we are usually ignorant.

In some of his plays, *The Pleasure of Honesty*, *All for the Best* and *Grafting*, he is concerned with showing how little the actual biological paternity of a child really matters in human relationships. In *Cap and Bells* and *Say it with Flowers* this idea is presented in a more cynical and unpleasant manner. One may agree or not, but at least one can be certain of what he is driving at. This does not apply, unhappily, to some of his other plays.

*Right you are (If you think So)* implies that truth is relative and depends upon the individual mind. The plot hinges upon whether certain people, whose family records have been destroyed in an earthquake, are giving a true account of their identity or whether one or other of them is insane. Comment is supplied by a character who is amused at the tendency to pry into other people's affairs and sceptical of the belief that absolute truth can ever be known. Finally, he remarks ironically: 'Well, and there, my friends, you have the truth, but are you satisfied?' At which the curtain prudently but unfairly comes down, before the spectators have a chance to answer!

The most famous of Pirandello's works is *Six Characters*

*in Search of an Author.* In this play, while a producer is conducting a rehearsal of one of Pirandello's own pieces (*Each of us his Own Part*), he is interrupted by six characters who complain that they have been projected by an author, but have never been combined into a finished drama. They ask to be allowed to complete their story through the rehearsing actors. The tale is slowly unfolded, constantly interrupted by comments. Two ideas emerge. One is that the creator of characters is less real than his personages, for he dies whilst they remain. The other is that connivance in an evil deed will ultimately have dire consequences.

The tale of the six characters is extremely incoherent, as though not yet fully worked out in the dramatist's mind. This much, however, is clear. The hero twenty years earlier had encouraged the elopement of his wife with his secretary and the latter, dying, has left the wife with three children. The hero has now run across the eldest girl in a very dubious resort. Shocked at this result of his earlier negligence he takes her back to his own home.

This play-within-the-play is never fully completed and the situation is further complicated by the six characters being regarded as real and the actors as figures of make-believe. For, Pirandello argues, a character born in the author's mind can be imagined in circumstances outside those planned for him by the author and can certainly outlive his creator. Towards the close of the play-within-the-play, the eloping mother's little daughter is drowned and her brother shoots himself, both being regarded as victims of their father's sin in sending his wife away with his secretary. He affirms loudly that the suicide of the boy is pretence and the manager concludes the performance with the typically inconclusive remark: 'Pretence! Reality! I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!'

We are therefore no nearer to knowing what is illusion

and what is reality than we were to discovering what is sanity and what is madness. If the characters who play a part are more real than their creator, so may a lunatic lead a more real life than a sane man. Such is the view that Pirandello seems to take in *Henry IV*, into the intricacies of which the already sufficiently baffled playwright may think it wiser not to penetrate.

There is no doubt that Pirandello possessed a highly original mind. He opened a new field to the playwright but whether the crop he sowed was tares or wheat it is very difficult to say. And we may be forgiven for remaining undecided. After all, Pirandello took this view: "that we are nothing more or less than what we seem to be to others!" So we are under no obligation to attempt any exact estimate of Pirandello himself.

From such subtleties it is a relief to turn to the straightforward dialogues of the Viennese dramatist, Arthur Schnitzler, whose hero in *The Affairs of Anatol* indulges in one transient amour after another. More brutally Schnitzler shows brazen love affairs in the series of three dialogues entitled *Reigen* (*Hands Around*). Love, lightly treated, indulgently regarded, is the theme of nearly all his work. In *Professor Bernhardt*, however, the theme is different. Here Schnitzler, himself a Jew, shows a Jewish president of a hospital, suffering imprisonment because he has begged a priest not to alarm a patient by administering the last sacrament. But this is not typical Schnitzler. He is at his best in light-hearted descriptions of illicit love and his dialogue is superb. So, too, is that of the Norwegian Helge Krog, who deals in a sophisticated manner with love, or more particularly with jealousy. He writes of the leisured class. There is little action and the setting might be that of any country. The characters of the people in *Happily Ever After*, *Triad* and *The Copy* are revealed solely through the dialogue. They are slight pieces but written with acute psychological insight. And here, with no more than a bare mention of

the Hungarian Ferenc Molnár's *Liliom*, a grim, touching low life story with an incongruous brief return of the dead hero from purgatory, this scant summary of outstanding modern European playwrights must come to an end. The English dramatists have been relegated for some chapters to the wings. It is now their turn to take the stage.

## CHAPTER XVII

### FROM ROBERTSON TO WILDE

UNTIL the beginning of the second half of the 19th century the English theatre, judged by the standard prevailing in other countries at the same time, was in a deplorable condition. Various causes contributed to this. One was the size of the theatres themselves.

Any producer knows that a play's chances of success are governed to some extent, quite apart from its intrinsic merit or the excellence of the actors, by the kind of theatre in which it is presented. A piece requiring intimate or subtle playing is lost in a vast building, whilst one depending on broad effects or sumptuous spectacle is hopelessly cramped in the limits of a small playhouse. Now, until 1843 the spoken drama was, theoretically at least, confined in London to *Drury Lane* and *Covent Garden*, though the *Theatre Royal, Haymarket* was also allowed to give 'straight' plays during the summer months. All these buildings were large, so large in fact that the actor had to shout at the top of his voice in order to make himself heard. Ranting was therefore inevitable. The player did not look at his fellow actors. He was vying with, not collaborating with them and played, quite literally, to the gallery. Intelligent people naturally lost interest in the performances and these theatres consequently often fell back on spectacular pieces to assure their income.

For many years the minor playhouses had confined themselves to pantomimes and spectacular plays. They now turned to a type of burlesque opera or musical farce

known as a *burletta*. Very unwisely the *Drury Lane* authorities, in presenting Fielding's burlesque *Tom Thumb* to which a few songs had been added, described it as a *burletta*. The minor theatres at once decided that any piece, provided that one or two songs were incorporated in it, came under the heading of a *burletta* and not in the category of the spoken drama, which they were not entitled to perform. This furnished them, as it were, with fresh ammunition and nearly twenty playhouses sprang up between 1800 and 1840, drawing more and more people away from *Drury Lane*. Finally, in 1843, the absurdity of the situation was recognised and these theatres were given leave to present any type of play that they chose.

In one way this was an advantage, but it did little or nothing to raise the standard of the drama. The prices in the minor playhouses were low and they had consequently appealed from the start mainly to an uneducated and humble audience. Now, with the ban lifted, upper and middle class people, still finding *Drury Lane* dull, did not transfer their allegiance to the smaller theatres. Careful parents kept away themselves and did not allow their children to run the risk of making undesirable acquaintances by frequenting them.

The status of the actors was not improved by this attitude. They had for long occupied an anomalous position. They were welcomed in aristocratic houses, but looked askance at by the middle class, and the violent diatribes against the theatre uttered by various ecclesiastics tended to discredit them. A profession ostracised by society does not readily attract to itself the best material. Consequently a good many disreputable characters did find their way on to the stage and the level of acting and the reputation of the theatre suffered still more.

The low opinion of the stage held by the majority of educated people had a disastrous effect on the standard



of the plays presented. There was no lack of literary talent in England at the time. It was the age of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope, but the drama made little appeal to them. For one thing the novel was still a comparatively new form and, in those days, highly remunerative. For another, with bad actors and a plebeian audience, from which the cultured classes held aloof, there was scant inducement for a successful writer to forsake the novel. Even the poets who tried play writing were half contemptuous of the theatre and did not trouble to learn stage technique. It is a little difficult to decide whether the badness of the plays was due to the crude tastes of most of the audience, or whether the spectators consisted of unenlightened people because of the poorness of the plays provided. Each factor probably acted upon the other. At all events the result was abysmal. Sentimental rubbish or highly coloured melodrama, neither having any resemblance to real life, held the boards, and plays such as Tom Taylor's *The Ticket of Leave Man*, recently broadcast, *Sweeney Todd* and *Maria Martin* were enormously popular and received with a complete seriousness now almost incredible.

The German-speaking Georges had taken little interest in the stage. Queen Victoria revived an old tradition by commanding Charles Kean to perform at Court. This heralded a change in the general attitude towards actors. Society and even the Church ceased to regard players as outlandish folk or agents of the devil. Consequently the actor himself ceased to be extravagant in speech and attire. He became indistinguishable from the other occupants of the drawing room in which he was now received and, on the stage, he dropped his artificial mannerisms. Acting at last began to be natural and realistic, and the knighthood awarded to Henry Irving marked the final close of the era of the 'rogue and vagabond.'

The new type of actor called forth a new type of play.

Realism was in the air and soon pieces were written which were not an insult to the intelligence of educated people. Their author was T. W. Robertson (1829-1871), himself an actor and the elder brother of the late Dame Madge Kendal.

He began by adapting pieces by Scribe and other foreign playwrights, but at the age of 36 he felt the urge to write an original comedy about lifelike people. The result was *Society* (1865), followed by *Ours*, *Caste*, *Home*, *School*, *Play*, *Birth*, *M.P.* and *War*, the simple titles being in themselves an indication of the new truth and realism he was bringing to the stage.

*Caste*, in particular, created a great sensation. In the first act Capt. D'Alroy, an aristocrat, brings his friend Hawtrey to the humble home of Esther Eccles. She is out and he seizes the opportunity to tell his friend that he is in love with her. They are interrupted by the arrival of her dissipated old father and her vulgar, good-hearted sister Polly, who is engaged to Sam Gerridge, a gas-fitter. Esther tells D'Alroy that she is going away to accept a theatrical engagement and suggests that they should not see each other again. This brings the situation to a head and D'Alroy proposes to her. She has just accepted him when old Eccles returns blind drunk, providing the audience with an effective curtain and D'Alroy with a glimpse of what he is to expect from his father-in-law. In the next act D'Alroy happily married, is on the point of leaving for active service in India, but he has not had the heart to break the news to his wife. His mother, aware of his departure but not of his marriage comes to bid him good-bye. Esther, hastily smuggled into an adjoining room, hears her remind him of the feats of his ancestors and the wiles of women and conclude her homily with a reference to his forthcoming voyage. At this Esther faints, her presence is discovered and the situation is made worse by the arrival of Sam, Polly and Old Eccles, who complete the discomfiture of

the Marchioness. In the last act Esther, now a mother and seemingly a widow, is about to get work on the stage once more. The Marchioness offers to bring the baby up in more luxurious surroundings, but Esther indignantly refuses. Then Hawtrey comes in to say what little he knows of his friend's capture and presumed death. He has barely finished before D'Alroy himself appears and explains that he had been rescued. The news is broken to Esther with unnecessary elaboration and the play ends with a general reconciliation.

Judged by modern standards of technique there are serious defects in *Caste*. For instance, D'Alroy has not told Hawtrey of his love for Esther until his arrival at her house. He did not expect her to be out, but unless she were, the audience would have no opportunity of learning how matters lay. It is really the old device of the confidant. In a modern play the audience finds out what the situation is by remarks skilfully inserted in the dialogue as the action proceeds. Another flaw is that people come in and go out to suit the exigencies of the plot. They leave so as to afford a chance for a confidential conversation. They return at the most awkward moment in order to produce a strong situation, but these actions are more convenient than convincing. The dialogue, too, though a great improvement on that of most plays of the time, is stilted. Again, it is highly unlikely that the Marchioness would warn her son of the dangers of a *mésalliance* at the hour of his departure for active service. It is a stage trick employed so that Esther may overhear and faint, thus bringing about the confrontation between the two women. The faults of *Caste*, in short, are those of the 'well-made' play.

Nevertheless Robertson's work was a milestone. He was attempting to portray everyday life and character. In comparison with the puppets of earlier days Eccles was a masterpiece of realism. The love scenes, too, are handled with skill. There are no melodramatic gestures,

passionate tears or floods of rhetoric. The proposal takes place in subdued tones in a room where Sam and Polly are having a rowdy lovers' quarrel. Robertson's plays marked the beginning of a change from extreme artificiality to realism, and he insisted that the acting and the setting should be appropriate to them. The furniture was solid. For the first time in England the rooms on the stage had ceilings. The actors made their entries by real doors with handles and they spoke something approaching natural dialogue without rant or declamation.

Robertson was a pioneer. For twenty years his lessons did not bear fruit, but the value of his services was recognised by Sir Arthur Pinero (1855-1934), whose *Trelawney of the Wells*, dealing—apart from a pleasant love story—with the passing of the old type of actor and the old artificial play, portrays Robertson under the guise of Tom Wrench.

This piece is not typical of Pinero, for the language is deliberately old-fashioned and the characters move in a romantic world to which the standards of probability cannot be fully applied. Things happen, not because they would, but because we want them to.

Pinero began with farce. Instead of translating or adapting continental successes, however, he wrote English farces for the English public. These and the Savoy operas of Gilbert and Sullivan constituted almost the only original forms of dramatic art evolved in this country during the greater part of the 19th century. Instead of the farce depending on misunderstanding or intrigue Pinero concentrated on the farce of character, showing people who are more or less credible despite the unreality of their actions. Naturally these pieces (*Dandy Dick*, *The Cabinet Minister* and *The Magistrate*, etc.) are 'dated', because the types of people caricatured do not now exist. But the dialogue is easy and humorous and the situations arise with seeming naturalness.

These works gave Pinero a start. The sentimental

comedy, *Sweet Lavender*, made him wealthy and popular, though it was little more than a capable piece of stage carpentry. Thereafter, however, he showed himself a critic and corrector of manners exposing vanity and pretentiousness. In *The Times*, an attack on the 'new rich' he tempered his satire with sentiment and, in *Letty*, with humour.

In those days if a serious subject was to be rendered palatable to the audience, it had necessarily to be treated lightly. The term 'Ibsenite' was still one of reproach. The 'problem' play revealing what polite society preferred to ignore was considered morbid and unpleasant. For this reason *The Profligate* (1889) is important. The story concerns a seducer who, having married lightly enough, falls deeply in love with his wife and takes poison when an episode of his earlier career rises up against him. As, however, the public wanted a happy ending, whether logical or not, Pinero changed the last act and made the wife intervene before her husband could swallow the poison. Either way the ending is weak, given the supposed character of the people, but it is a powerful, thought-provoking and effective play. The profligate is overtaken by retribution. He is not punished by ironic destiny, but as a result of his own actions. Destiny, in other words, is really nothing but character.

This view of tragedy lies at the root of Pinero's best known play, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1894). Here a woman with a 'past' marries a chivalrous widower. Her greatest wish is to gain the affection of her step-daughter, but when the girl falls in love, the man proves to be one of her step-mother's former lovers, and Paula Tanqueray kills herself in despair.

Except for one carefully engineered exit in the first act the play is finely constructed. The dialogue, still florid in *The Profligate*, has become much quieter and more natural. The husband only loses self restraint at a time when he logically would, his wife more often, but that is in accord

with her neurotic character. The smoothest diction belongs to Cayley Drummle, the man of the world, who hides his depth of feeling under an air of cynicism. Nor does Pinero make the mistake of using witty remarks for their own sake. The speeches reveal the characters, almost the first words uttered by Paula: 'I love fruit—when it's expensive' giving a clue to her whole nature. The play is not written to a thesis in the manner of Dumas fils or Zola. Pinero leaves the spectator to draw his own conclusions without transforming Cayley Drummle into a *raisonneur*.

Other serious plays followed. *The Gay Lord Quex*, superficially flippant, is really a condemnation of the frivolous attitude of high-class society towards marriage. *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* and *The Benefit of the Doubt* deal with the difficulty of friendship, as opposed to love, between the sexes. Pinero's greatest achievement from the point of view of dramatic craftsmanship is *His House in Order*, in which a second wife, continually reminded of her predecessor's virtues and efficiency, comes upon evidence of her infidelity and is tempted to flaunt it in the face of her patronising relatives. Finally the secret is disclosed to her husband alone and he settles down to make a fresh start to his married life.

This is a well-made play about real people confronted with an interesting and perfectly possible problem. But the influence of Ibsen was beginning to make itself felt and people were now wanting something different from the play of technique. Pinero had been reared in the Victorian tradition. He did not show the fearlessness of the new generation of dramatists. He was unwilling to deal boldly with social problems or attack the basis of society. He could produce credible characters and involve them in a situation logically developed from his premises. He brought thinking men and women to the theatre. He wrote with a keen eye for theatrical effect. But his thought was never really profound and neither he, nor

Henry Arthur Jones, (*The Liars*, *Mrs. Dane's Defence*) ventured to widen the scope and examine the structure of civilised institutions. For that reason Pinero, a first class theatrical craftsman for fifty years, was outstripped by Galsworthy and Bernard Shaw.

It was not timidity that prevented Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) from tackling social problems. It was his entire lack of interest in general ideas. Art, as he conceived it, had no practical use. It was purely decorative and artificial—an end in itself. In his view, to reproduce actuality or even to give the illusion of it was inartistic and decadent. He was accused of being a poser. Perhaps he was. But his passion for beauty, evident in certain chapters of *Dorian Gray* and in his dramatic style, was genuine enough. He loathed the mediocre and the commonplace. He was a polished artist in words who hated platitude and adored epigram. It is therefore in the dialogue that his plays are supreme. In comparison with his swift interplay of words the long speeches and laboured conversational give-and-take of his contemporaries seem crude and clumsy.

His characters enjoy talking, generally on trivial subjects. This brilliant dialogue is the chief merit of Wilde's plays. It is also a defect. Witty phrases seldom help forward a plot and are rarely an aid to characterisation. Most of his personages are far more brilliant than they could ever be in real life—not that Wilde wanted reality. Moreover they are so uniformly brilliant that they are undistinguishable from one another. We often cannot remember off hand who uttered a particular remark, under what circumstances or even in what play. Nevertheless we remember the epigram itself.

The plots are clever though unlikely, for Wilde could not be slipshod. He was sometimes sentimental (*Lady Windermere's Fan*), occasionally melodramatic (*An Ideal Husband*), once farcical (*The Importance of Being Earnest*). The characters are all puppets. Neither their heads nor

their hearts interest us. But we are delighted by their tongues. The plot does not matter. As long as the characters go on talking we are content to listen. The plays read as well as they act and that, from one point of view, is a condemnation of their merit as drama. Pinero brought reality and craftsmanship back to the stage, following a trail which Robertson had begun to blaze. Wilde brought mastery of dialogue and his work attained the high-watermark of artificial comedy. Later dramatists owe much to both of them.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### GALSWORTHY AND BERNARD SHAW

VARIOUS writers have begun as dramatists and then turned to the novel. Few men have continued to practise both forms at the same time and fewer still have attained an equal degree of excellence in each. John Galsworthy shares this distinction with Somerset Maugham. Whichever medium he chooses his writing reveals him as an artist, a lover of humanity and a chivalrous crusader against cruelty and oppression.

He was born in 1867 and was educated at Harrow and Oxford. It has been said that he was a snob, because he wrote almost exclusively of the rapidly dwindling upper middle class. This is a ridiculous statement, for the reason that the man who proudly proclaims that he is not a snob is actually showing himself to be one by distinguishing himself from others. His remark is as contradictory as that of the legendary Hyde Park orator who began his denunciation of religion with the words: 'Thank God! I'm an atheist!' Moreover, an author who relies more on observation than on flights of fancy must necessarily write for choice of the class he knows best. That is, if he be sincere. And Galsworthy was profoundly sincere. He aimed at truth and reality and sympathised deeply with the misery of his fellow men. He was anxious to put matters right and set to work to examine the foundations of the social system and the roots of human nature. His conception of art bade him control his emotions, but his impassivity was a mask.

Had Galsworthy possessed sense of form alone he

would have written 'well-made' plays, as elegant, objective and trifling as those of Sardou or Labiche. But for his highly developed sense of form he might have produced realistic pieces in the manner of Gorki, mere slices of life made without discrimination. Had his artistic conscience not led him to be impartial, he would have written thesis plays intended to justify his views on some matter about which he felt acutely. But he combined depth of feeling, sound technique and constructive imagination with a high degree of impartiality. His views are generally apparent, but he was no blatant propagandist. He expressed his ideas artistically and fairly without weighing down the scales.

These characteristics are clearly to be seen in his first play, *The Silver Box* (1906). It is realistic, not in the narrow sense, but in that it deals with real life, and it is set down with great accuracy of observation. It is a study in contrasts, the scene alternating between the comfortable home of the Barthwicks and the cheerless lodgings belonging to their charwoman and her husband. The rich man's son, who had stolen a girl's purse when he was drunk, escapes the penalty of the law because his father can afford to write a cheque to hush the matter up. But the charwoman's husband who steals a cigarette box from the house is sent to prison. Even so the balance is fairly held. The rich are not represented as wholly vicious, nor the poor as paragons of virtue. No single individual is to blame for the unequal distribution of justice. The servants of the law are not corrupt. The fault lies with the judicial system. And since laws are made by the chosen representatives of the people, society itself is responsible and the audience, as members of the community, must look to their conscience. The spectators may be sitting in the stalls. They are none the less in the dock. Not that Galsworthy allows his own feelings or personality to obtrude themselves. He writes with immense restraint. There are no deliberately brilliant

lines, no Shavian paradoxes, no comments from a *raisonneur* and no furious denunciations of injustice. The ending is as unemphatic as that of a Tchekhov play. Everything is subordinated to the theme. It speaks for itself and it speaks with tremendous eloquence.

Galsworthy was a lawyer and court scenes figure prominently in his plays. There is a magnificent one in *Justice*. Here his grievance against the community as the ultimate makers of law, is that no distinction is made between the wicked and the weak. No account is taken of circumstance or character. To raise the money necessary to get a woman away from a brutal husband a clerk adds a nought to a cheque. He is no skilled criminal. Detection follows and the prosecuting Counsel denounces the defence as mere sentimental claptrap. The clerk goes to jail where he suffers the ghastly ordeal of solitary confinement. The warders are not monsters of cruelty. They are merely carrying out orders. The prisoner emerges a broken man and the last act reveals the hopelessness of his position and ends with his inevitable suicide. His employers are not to blame. The man is a weakling led into crime by motives with which the jury as private individuals would sympathise. But the law crushes the weak just as in the earlier play it crushed the poor. There are two tragedies : that of the clerk and that of the unhappy wife with whose misery the law does not deign to concern itself at all.

There is conflict not contrast in this piece and, as always with Galsworthy, an effective undercurrent of irony. The story is told with artistry and conviction and the very inarticulateness of the characters emphasises the helplessness of people caught in the cogs of a well-regulated and ruthless machine.

In *Strife*, Galsworthy's greatest tragedy, the conflict is between capital and labour : the underlying idea the uselessness of it all. The old chairman of directors holds out against the men's demands and is ultimately out-voted

by his more timorous fellows. The strike leader, a worthy antagonist, prolongs the struggle in the effort to secure better conditions, until his wife dies of starvation. His sacrifice is in vain. The men lose heart and negotiate behind his back and the irony lies in the fact that the terms agreed upon are identical with those offered before the beginning of the strike six months previously.

There is nothing strained about Galsworthy's plays. There is no melodrama and no ranting. They are admirably constructed and convey an overwhelming effect of truth. It is impossible for the spectator to quell the uneasy stirrings of his conscience by pretending that the facts are unfairly presented. He may, if he likes, throw the blame on society and refuse his own share of responsibility as a member of the community, but he cannot discount the play on the ground of bias. Yet, for all their seriousness of purpose, Galsworthy's pieces do not cease to be good entertainment for anybody who is interested in real life. They are of the same kind as Miss Clemence Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* (1921) which, were not the women better drawn than the men, might well be the work of Galsworthy, of whom, in his plays, at least, the reverse is true.

Galsworthy's impartiality is not absolute. He is a dramatist as well as a moralist. For this reason, though he is wholly faithful to truth, he does sometimes take an instance which is none the less true for being extreme. For example, in *Escape*, though all the events are perfectly possible, the central character, whose encounters with various people after his flight from prison furnish the substance of the play, is not a criminal except by accident. He has killed a police officer in a scuffle while trying to prevent him from arresting a street-walker, with whom he had been holding a perfectly harmless conversation. The record of the majority of the denizens of Dartmoor Prison is, presumably, not so blameless. But, if the convict were not a sympathetic figure, we should not be

interested in his adventures. In other words there would be no play. In *Loyalties*, too, the officer who sinks to robbery is particularly unlucky and the Jew exceptionally irritating. Apart from this slight concession, however, the drama of conflicting loyalties is logically worked out. This careful selection of his chief character is not a defect. It is a tribute to Galsworthy's dramatic sense. He might so easily have preached and become tedious. But he never did.

It is true that Galsworthy's characters, though convincing, are not memorable. We do not think of them as of the personages of Dickens, who exist for us quite apart from the events in which they participate. We think less of the personal characteristics of Galsworthy's creations than of their social significance. They are necessary factors in the working out of a plot and their individuality is generally of secondary importance. In certain plays, *Joy*, for instance, which illustrates, incidentally, Galsworthy's immense sympathy with the young, the characters arouse a more personal interest. But these are exceptions.

An undoubted flaw is the lack of humour in Galsworthy's writing. This may have been due in part to his sense of discipline. It was more likely temperamental. At all events his work, so true to life, so admirably constructed and so essentially dramatic, does reveal here and there a certain stiffness and want of spontaneity. This is his only serious fault and it shows itself chiefly in the dialogue. His plays are so impartial that they seem almost artificially balanced and the characters appear at times to speak with reluctance. Yet there is nothing cold about Galsworthy. He wrote chiefly of a limited social class, but he dealt with wide social problems. Whether he will be remembered primarily as a novelist or as a dramatist it is hard to say. In any case he will also be remembered as a man.

Galsworthy's characters express themselves with diffi-

culty, Bernard Shaw's with extreme fluency. This is but one of the many differences between the two outstanding dramatists of the early 20th century.

Shaw has been for so long famous as a playwright that it comes as a surprise to realise that he was 36 when his first piece was produced. But his activities before that time had been considerable. Born in Dublin in 1856 he picked up more knowledge outside school than in any of the various educational establishments that he attended. He worked for a time in an estate office, but found the work unbearable and came to London. Here he had a hard struggle and it says much for his pertinacity and courage that he stuck to writing despite the fact that his earnings from his pen over a period of nine years amounted to no more than £6.

From his mother he acquired a love and knowledge of music which served him in good stead. He became successively a music, art and dramatic critic and in each revealed decided and provocative views. As everyone knows he turned socialist and, in fact, more than any single individual, he made the Socialist party. He showed himself a first class debater in the Fabian Society and a highly successful speaker in Hyde Park, where his wit and power of repartee, backed by solid argument, made him a formidable man to heckle. Finally, having written several novels, (*Love Among the Artists*, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, *The Unsocial Socialist*) he turned to the drama and has since written close on fifty plays.

He began with *Widowers' Houses*, an attack on slum landlords. Then came *The Philanderer*, which contains among other things a denunciation of vivisection. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession* he laid bare the realities of prostitution and, in *Arms and the Man*, he jeered at the cheap romanticism with which the public invests the profession of arms. These were his first four plays. Since then he has attacked many things: the worship of Shakespeare, imperialism, politicians of all parties, popular

education, doctors, clergymen, blood sports, the Salvation Army, conventional ideas about love and marriage, the English treatment of Ireland, Sir Henry Irving and vaccination, to name but a few. He has, on the other hand, championed Ibsen and Wagner, when both were highly unpopular, and he has successfully and wittily defended Bernard Shaw.

People seldom resent accusations or unkind remarks about themselves if they are perfectly certain that they are untrue. It is quite different when the charges are justified. That was for long one of the reasons of Shaw's widespread unpopularity. He had a disquieting knack of being right. Nowadays his work seldom rouses resentment because the public attitude has undergone a change. One instance will suffice. In *Pygmalion*, the dustman's daughter sheds, under stress of emotion, the thin veneer of culture that she has acquired and uses an adjective, the loss of which from the language would deprive the Services, the working classes and Mayfair society of their most cherished epithet. Yet when Eliza Doolittle pronounced the fatal word, the utterance of which was perfectly in keeping with her character, there was a chorus of horrified protest, despite the fact that the audience must have been well aware that that was precisely the adjective which the girl would have used in real life to relieve her feelings. No doubt Shaw inserted the word with malice aforethought to pierce the complacency of his audience. But dramatically it was perfectly correct. To-day the word passes without adverse comment. Sometimes indeed it is employed to raise a cheap and unworthy laugh. But that is not Shaw's fault.

When he began to write the audience was ill prepared for serious drama. Shaw was a serious playwright with ideas. It was natural therefore that he should use the theatre as a means of asking questions about social systems and matters of importance in general. He had to fight against an outlook that was unwilling to dissociate

theatrical entertainment from mere frivolity or sentimentality. The now universal acceptance of the view that social questions or eternal problems can be honestly considered on the stage and the play still remain an entertainment which people are willing to pay to see is due in this country to Shaw more than to any other dramatist. Many of his plays—those dealing with the emancipation of women, for instance—may seem 'dated.' That is because the point of view has changed. And this change of view has been largely brought about by Shaw himself.

It took him the best part of ten years to convince people that his plays were worth hearing. Few of them have been commercial successes in the West End, though they have constantly been acted by repertory and touring companies in this country and elsewhere. They have, on the other hand, been enormously widely read.

The popular distrust of serious drama with which Shaw had to contend led him to sugar the pill, as it were, with wit. Only thus could the audience be induced to swallow it. And this, while it pleased the spectators, profoundly puzzled them. How, it was felt, could a man be as serious as he professed when he kept laughing? The result is that Shaw even to-day is regarded by different people in different ways. He has been termed irreligious, though he is actually a deeply religious man. He has been called immoral though he is actually a strict Puritan without a trace of scandal attaching to his name, and it is very certain that a person who figures so prominently in the press would not have escaped unscathed by the newspapers, if there had been the least ground for suspicion against him. The most general accusation, however, is that he is a buffoon and a fraud. Actually he is neither, but people find it difficult to understand that a man can be sincere and witty at the same time.

Shaw has himself to blame to some extent for this misconception. His wit is not invariably disciplined. He makes a point with a witty remark. But sometimes



he will make a joke for its own sake or even allow a character, of whom according to the moral of the play he should disapprove, to get the better of the exchanges of repartee.

This is undeniably disconcerting and goes far to account for the charges of insincerity and inconsistency levelled against him. It makes it hard for the spectator to be certain of his real views and gives him an uneasy feeling that Shaw is laughing at him. Why, he complains, should a Socialistic dramatist allow King Magnus in *The Apple Cart* to score so heavily over his Socialist Cabinet? Surely he cannot mean what he says? The answer presumably is that Shaw, though a Socialist, or rather, perhaps, a bolshevist, is an enemy of muddled thinking, who despises any kind of socialism that is an emotional and not an intellectual creed resting on an economic foundation. King Magnus in comparison with his ignorant and not over-honest ministers is a sincere person with a luminous mind and, as such, worthy of respect.

Shaw's dramatic output is so large and so varied that it is impossible within the limits of this chapter to discover his ideas from the consideration of individual plays. The number of things he has attacked shows that his work is largely destructive. But, like Ibsen, though in a very different manner, he was clearing the ground of dead wood. He was trying to make a clean sweep of traditional opinions and conventions that were accepted without question, and for no other reason than that they were of long standing. He is pleading all the time for honest thinking and therefore shows the absurdities and inconsistencies of many accepted ideas and prejudices. Whether we agree with what he advocates does not matter. He bids us think things out for ourselves and free our minds from prejudice, superstition and middle-class morality. We may, if we wish, still hold to our former views. Let us at least do so, because we have submitted

them to some more reliable evidence than mere custom or tradition.

Shaw's greatest foes are sham idealism and sentimentality. He hates the idea of romantic love and refuses to admit that a woman is going to play a purely passive part in her approach to marriage, the most important episode in her life. For him women are realists and, as in the case of Shakespeare's heroines, they are stronger than the men. Shaw sees them as huntresses and admires their cleverness. But while he attacks sentimentality of all kinds, because it is so often a form of dishonest thinking and a refusal to face facts, he does not believe in the power of science as a substitute for religion. Indeed he distrusts science. God to him is a life force. He holds that the desire to perpetuate the species is powerful and God-given. He is no believer in democratic rule and maintains that most people are not and never will be fit to govern. Much can be achieved by legislation. More depends on a spiritual reform within the people. What men really will that they can do. The breed may be improved by marriages in which the health of the parties is more important than the blueness of their blood. But Shaw puts greater faith in creative evolution which lays stress on man's will and his capacity to transform himself and his environment. And that transformation depends on fearless thinking. Some of these ideas have now become more or less commonplace. When he began to write they were disconcertingly original.

Shaw's plays are often badly constructed. His early pieces naturally show the influence of the 'well-made' and thesis plays of the time. But when he reached dramatic maturity he ceased, save in the case of *Heartbreak House* which is reminiscent of Tchekhov, to owe anything to other playwrights. For him the theatre is chiefly a means of expressing his ideas. Many characters are therefore no more than his mouthpieces. He certainly appeals more to the intellect than to the emotions, but

this does not mean that he is incapable of creating real and appealing characters as well. *Candida* and *St. Joan* are outstanding examples. Marchbanks, the young poet in *Candida*, is another, and some of the low life characters, Eliza Doolittle and 'Enery Straker are far from being puppets.

A few of the plays are written without ulterior motive, though most of them contain hits at something. *Fanny's First Play*, *You never Can Tell* and *How He Lied to Her Husband* are pure comedy. So, too, really is *Candida*. It contradicts Ibsen's *Doll's House* by showing that a woman need not necessarily go outside her home to find an outlet for her abilities, but it is primarily a character study. Most of the other pieces contain profound ideas. These were implied in Ibsen's works. They provide the action in Shaw's. The physical action is slight, but there is an abundant interchange and conflict of ideas. That is why Shaw's characters are so talkative. He can make thrilling action out of an argument and his dialogue is superb. It is remarkably easy to speak. It is immensely witty and it can be amazingly beautiful as anyone who has heard the inquisitor's speech in *St. Joan* or Lilith's closing words in *Back to Methuselah* will agree.

It is true that Shaw has made few or no experiments in new forms of dramatic expression. He had no need to attempt any. Being concerned chiefly with the spreading of ideas he found existing forms sufficient for his purpose. He has never bothered greatly about construction. One of his latest plays, *The Millionairess*, contains an array of verbose and typically Shavian puppets who suddenly step aside to allow the inclusion of a poignant realistic scene about a 'sweated' tailor and his wife. If any other dramatist wrote so loosely constructed a piece it would have to wait long for production. But then no other dramatist possesses Bernard Shaw's compensating gifts. Unquestionably he is sometimes a propagandist. Occasionally, he strikes us as facetious and cheap. He

remains our shrewdest thinker, our most uncompromising critic. In Victorian times the novel crowded out the drama. Under Elizabeth the drama was predominant. The modern revival in the drama of ideas is largely due to Bernard Shaw.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE PRE-WAR DRAMA IN ENGLAND

THE work of most writers is influenced by their environment or the age in which they live. This is particularly true of dramatists who treat of social questions. It applies hardly at all to Sir James Barrie. He seldom deals with general problems and is completely at home in a world of his own devising. This does not mean that he is a pessimist who takes refuge in mysterious islands because he cannot endure the world of actuality. Swift and other satirists invented fabulous places in order to expose the shortcomings of the real world. Barrie departs to a fanciful spot, partly in order to view the real world in truer perspective and partly because he has the secret of dramatising day-dreams. He is not a satirist or, if he be, he is a very kindly one. But he is a playwright of uncanny skill and intuition.

He was born in 1860 at Kirriemuir, the 'Thrums' of his book, and was educated at Dumfries and Edinburgh University. He took to journalism, working for some time on the *Nottingham Post* and came to London in 1885. He became known as a writer of whimsical, humorous stories of Scottish life and achieved fame with his romantic novel *The Little Minister*, subsequently dramatised, the tale of a young clergyman who falls in love with a gipsy. It was the sentimental note of this play and of *The Professor's Love Story*, which appealed to London audiences, still baffled and upset by the early works of Bernard Shaw or the Ibsen productions staged by J. T. Grein at the Independent Theatre, Barrie followed these with

*Quality Street*, a charming piece as comfortably remote from disturbing contemporary reality as *Cranford*.

Then a new Barrie appeared with *The Admirable Crichton*, a masterpiece from every point of view. It was superbly constructed, delightful to read, amusing and highly dramatic. It dealt moreover with so fundamental a question as the structure of English society, while yet remaining wholly free from propaganda. It can be regarded lightly or profoundly. It is satisfying in either way.

The first act shows us the home of Lord Loam on the occasion, which to the relief of all occurs only once a month, when the amiable, incompetent head of the house regards all men as his equals and invites, or rather commands, the servants to take tea with himself and his daughters. No one enjoys it, least of all Crichton, the butler, who holds that some are born to command and others to obey and thinks himself as far superior to the stable boy as he is inferior to his employer. The whole scene is one of rich comedy.

The next act finds the party, as a result of a wreck, cast away on a desert island where artificial class distinctions perforce give way to those based on natural ability. Lord Loam becomes a hewer of wood and drawer of water. The Hon. Ernest Woolley learns that epigrams are of no help in catching fish and Crichton emerges inevitably as the leader. After two years the Hon. Ernest is imploring the kitchen maid to marry him, but she turns him down. The eldest daughter, Lady Mary, no longer the bored and supercilious creature of her Mayfair days, but a healthy young Amazon, joyfully accepts Crichton's offer of marriage. But before the ceremony can be performed by the parson, also included in the party, a ship comes in sight. It is a tense moment. Crichton realises that rescue will mean an end to his brief dominion, but he crushes down the temptation not to fire the beacon, long prepared for such an eventuality, and, at the arrival of the

rescue party, Lord Loam automatically reverts to his old position of authority. In the last act—in a way an anti-climax though a necessary one—Crichton is once more the butler and Lady Mary, the only person besides him not gifted with a facile forgetfulness, rather wistfully resumes her engagement to the socially eligible Lord Brocklehurst.

This 'island-motif' appears several times in Barrie's work, but always accompanied henceforward by fantasy. *Peter Pan* is a familiar example. Decriers of Barrie's work are apt to forget that this is primarily a children's play, a presentation of childish day-dreams. And yet there is something more in it than that. For Peter is a pathetic figure clinging desperately to a pretence. Normal children (and even adults who are not insufferably intellectual) indulge in day dreams. But they know perfectly well that the world of their fancy is not a real one. Peter will not give up his dreams and becomes a kind of waif. He is, if you like, a case of arrested development. He is also a fanciful but true illustration of the ultimate necessity of facing realities. For Barrie has no use for cowards. Not that he worships success. On the contrary he distrusts it and admires courage in heroic failure. His rich men receive short shrift. This is clearly shown by two one-act plays.

In *The Will*, which, like Arnold Bennett's *Milestones* (in collaboration with Edward Knoblock) deals with three generations, he shows a young man with an income of £170 visiting his lawyer and arranging to leave all his meagre estate to his wife. Thirty years later, when he is a very rich man, he calls again, this time wrangling with her. In the last scene, in advanced old age, he realises the futility of wealth. *The Twelve Pound Look* deals with a financier, recently made a knight, who hires a typist to undertake the correspondence arising from the honour bestowed upon him. She proves to be his former wife. He learns to his astonishment that she had not really left

him for another man, but because she could not endure to go on living with anybody so coarse, stupid, selfish and successful. Her typewriter had cost her £12 and brought her independence. She goes out and his present wife, unaware of her identity, comes in and, with the question: 'Are they expensive?' shows him that she too is unimpressed by his wordly success and hankering for her freedom.

Most men, for Barrie, are selfish, though sometimes unconsciously. On women he looks with far greater sympathy. Some of them are pretty, appealing and helpless, but others, often less physically attractive, have courage, loyalty and an understanding pity. They are neither hard nor passive. They are womanly but not weak, and Barrie shows an instinctive, perhaps intuitive insight into the workings of the human heart. His tender comprehension is well shown in *What Every Woman Knows*, in which Maggie's devoted, hard-headed brothers advance an ambitious young railway porter the money to pay his University fees, on condition that he marries their sister at the end of five years if she wants him for a husband. She gives him a year's grace to enable him to stand for Parliament and then heroically tears up the document, which touches him so much that, though not in the least in love with her, he fulfils his part of the bargain. Then, inevitably, he becomes infatuated with a charming young empty-headed lady of title and Maggie, loving him desperately and sure that she herself and not the other really provides him with his inspiration in his work, plays a bold game and runs the risk of losing him for good. In the end, of course, he finds out his mistake. Barrie's outlook is kindly rather than bitter, and he prefers a happy ending to an unpleasant one, but the development of the plot is dictated by the nature of the characters, not manipulated by the author. It is a sentimental ending, but not an illogical one.

There is no fantasy in *What Every Woman Knows*.



There is a great deal in *Mary Rose*, an exquisite tale of a girl who is spirited away on a remote Hebridean island and returns 25 years later, still unchanged in age to wait forlornly for a space until she, too, finds rest. In *Dear Brutus* there is a wood, not an island, but it serves the same purpose. Through the mischievous machinations of Lob, alias Puck, his guests, all of whom have longed for a second chance, wander on Midsummer Eve into an enchanted wood and there, for an hour, find their wishes fulfilled. The philanderer, now married to the girl with whom he had been flirting, is bored with her and seeks relaxation with his real wife. The dishonest butler who says that he never had a fair chance, has become a prosperous, but crooked financier. The drunken artist learns what a different man he would have been had he had a daughter, while his wife discovers that she would have fared no better had she married someone else. Only one, a middle-aged, unambitious soul, is contented with his lot and returns to the normal world without the regret, shame or salutary self-reproach of the rest, who realise that the second chance for which they craved would have made in most cases, little difference to their lives. The fault lay in themselves rather than with cruel fate.

Many people have written fantasies. The surprising feature of Barrie's is that the characters, though slipping in and out of a fantastic world, are essentially real. Here and there, perhaps, his work is a trifle over-sentimental, but it is only rarely. He writes with deceptive simplicity. His dialogue is brilliant and illumines the characters. He can lend reality to an elusive and fanciful idea. Pathos and humour are perfectly combined and even the most puckish of his plays is perfectly constructed. No one can compete with Barrie on his own ground. *Berkeley Square* by John Balderston (in collaboration with Sir John Squire) captures the fantasy but lacks the humour. The works of A. A. Milne have the charm and the humour, but, for the most part, without the fantasy, whilst the brothers

Quintero in Spain possess the same ability to take the audience into their confidence. Their stage directions too are sometimes as delightful as Barrie's, but again the fantasy is lacking. The Latin races would probably make little or nothing of Barrie. He is too sentimental and too imaginative. He is, nevertheless, an instinctive and highly original dramatist with a unique combination of qualities.

The work of Robertson might have given rise to thesis or naturalistic writing. Fortunately Galsworthy and Shaw were not merely realists who wrote intellectual plays about contemporary society. They were creative artists as well as thinkers. They practised the art of selection instead of producing crude slices of life. The same applies to Granville-Barker.

Had he written no plays he would still be an important figure in English dramatic history. His work in Shakespearean production has already been noted. He was an accomplished actor, whose wife Lillah McCarthy (Lady Keeble) played leading rôles during his Court Theatre régime. He worked for a time with Mr. Gordon Craig, the chief enemy of the naturalistic producer, and he has translated the plays of the Quinteros and some of the works of Schnitzler.

His own dramatic output, though small, is notable. He began, in collaboration with Laurence Housman, with *Prunella*, a delightful 'Pierrot' fantasy, on the lines of Rostand's *Fantasticks*. Then in 1899 came *The Marrying of Anne Leete*, followed by *The Voysey Inheritance*, *Waste*, and *The Madras House*.

In the first, George Leete snaps his fingers at convention and marries a farmer's daughter. His relatives cry out in horror, but his sister, undeterred, goes one better and marries the gardener, thereby showing her kinship with the Shavian women who, urged by the 'life-force,' claim the right to choose their own mates regardless of class distinctions. This has furnished the theme of a hundred

fairy tales, but Granville-Barker presents it realistically.

*The Voysey Inheritance* is more original. It deals with an ethical problem of financial honesty. Edward Voysey learns with dismay that his father, a reputable solicitor, has for years speculated with the money entrusted to him by his clients. The father sees no reason to change his habits but, on his sudden death, Edward discloses the facts to the rest of his family and urges them to forgo their share so that he may pay back as much as possible. They all object and the idealist finds himself forced against his will to compromise with his conscience. It is a fine play which gives the effect of being drawn straight from real life: it is also a first-class drama.

*Waste* is less satisfactory. It involves a Cabinet crisis over a Church Disestablishment Bill and the suicide of a politician, whose career is broken as the result of an intrigue with a woman for whom he has the most ephemeral passion. Sound pieces of legislation, the potentially useful life of an unborn child and that of the man himself are all thrown away. It is a grim, powerful drama and came under the ban of the Censor. It shows the havoc caused by barriers and prohibitions as well as by cowardice or dishonesty. The futility of so many lives under the tyrannous rule of these restrictions is portrayed in *The Madras House*. It is a strangely formless play with episodes bearing out the main theme but having little relationship with one another. It was an experiment and not a wholly successful one.

Pinero, perhaps because he was under the necessity of flattering his audience, had taken the view that only the affairs of people who were under no necessity of working for a living, were dramatically interesting. His successors showed that a play of personal emotions could be made out of the affairs of ordinary folk: moreover the emotion need not necessarily be love alone.

Harold Brighouse proved this in *Hobson's Choice*, a piece set in the period of 1880. It deals with the dis-

comfiture of a harsh old bootmaker who does not realise to what extent the success of his business depends on his daughter. The characters, however, are more important than the plot or the situations. The diffident Will Mossop, married and turned into a man by the strong-minded daughter, the father and Maggie herself are splendid, detailed portraits. They are comic creations, but they are also amazingly real and the play captures perfectly the local dialect, the outlook and the humour of Lancashire. It is not a play about industrialism. It is a comedy of Lancashire Life.

*The Price of Coal* has a pit disaster for its central incident. Though it ends happily, it is a grim piece of work and once again it is the characters that matter most. Other one-act plays have a very different setting. There is the restrained and touching 'Cranford' piece *Followers*, and such delicate fantasies as *How the Weather is Made* and *The Prince and the Piper*. Industrial towns, the countryside and the realms of fancy appear to have little in common. Harold Brighouse moves with confidence in all of them.

Lancashire also provides the setting for the plays of Stanley Houghton. His death at the age of 32 was a tragedy, for he might have become a really great dramatist. As it was, he excelled in depicting situations rather than in drawing character. In a one act piece, *The Dear Departed*, for instance, he derives excellent comedy from the sudden appearance of an old man whose belongings his relatives, believing him dead, are preparing to remove with unseemly haste. In *The Master of the House*, the situation is reversed with grim effect. An old man's young wife and his worthless son are wrangling over alterations in the will, which one wants and the other does not, when they discover that the invalid has died in his chair and sits there in cold brooding reproach over their cupidity. A full length play, *The Younger Generation*, deals amusingly with the old conflict between age and

youth, the children kicking over the traces and the father pompously exercising his parental authority, until his dignity is brought low by the revelation that his own early days had not been so impeccable as he pretends.

It was in *Hindle Wakes* that Houghton came nearest to making a play of character rather than of situation. It is the tale of a mill-girl who, during her annual week's holiday at Blackpool, has an affair with her employer's son. He is a spineless creature and the originality of the play lies not in his unwillingness to marry Fanny Hawthorn, but in her sturdy refusal to marry him. He is too much of a weakling for her and she decides to go through with her trouble by herself. She is a striking character, but even in this it is the unexpected twist in the plot that makes the play.

The people in Harold Chapin's pieces speak Cockney, not broad Lancashire. He was an American citizen, but he wrote English plays and died as a British soldier. Furthermore he understood and expressed the Cockney mind far better than any Englishman could hope to capture the spirit of New York's East Side. *The Dumb and the Blind* is a masterpiece of restrained writing. There is no incident save that a bargee, hitherto away most of the week, gets a job which enables him to sleep at home and is awed and bewildered on learning how much the change means to his wife. The characters are too inarticulate to express their feelings adequately, too distrustful of emotions to be able to explore them, but Chapin has caught admirably both their groping uncertainty and their fundamental goodness of heart. It is a poignant little play, in contrast with the savage irony of *It's the Poor that Elps the Poor*, which shows Cockney sympathisers providing a lavish funeral for a child who has died of malnutrition. Chapin was sorry for his low-life characters. The comfortable middle-class occupants of a houseboat rouse him to faintly cynical mirth

and he makes comedy out of their triviality in *The New Morality*.

St. John Hankin in *The Return of the Prodigal* (1905) wrote of the same social class. The scapegrace son is generally either a romantic or a sordid figure. Here he shows the most disarming effrontery and, disdaining the offer of a job, coolly blackmails his father into making him an allowance. Such is the comic theme of a play which also contains a highly moving, yet restrained portrait of the prodigal's sister, who fills the thankless rôle of the unwanted woman. Hankin had a light touch that found scope in a series of *Dramatic Sequels* (*The New Wing at Elsinore*, etc.) which almost reach the high level of parody attained by Maurice Baring in *The Rehearsal* and others of his *Diminutive Dramas*.

Alfred Sutro was impatient of the artificialities of society. His favourite device was to take a sincere, not over-polished wealthy Colonial or business man and make him fall in love with a leading light of Mayfair. This was Molière's practice. His reactions to what he discovers beneath the veneer of politeness provide the comedy and enable Sutro to indulge his gift of satire. This is the method of *The Walls of Jericho* and of the deft little duologue *A Marriage Has Been Arranged*. It is true also of *The Choice* (1919).

Much of the work of these men was staged originally in provincial repertory theatres, which under the leadership of such enthusiasts as Miss Horniman (Manchester) and Sir Barry Jackson (Birmingham) have rendered enormous service to the theatre. The same applies to the famous Abbey Theatre, Dublin, founded for the production of Irish national drama. It was here that the comic or farcical one-act pieces of Lady Gregory were mostly staged. Here too were produced the poetic dramas of W. B. Yeats, which are sometimes reminiscent of Maeterlinck (*The Shadowy Waters*), sometimes fantastic (*The Land of Heart's Desire*), sometimes symbolic and

national (*Cathleen ni Houlihan*) and occasionally abstract and obscure (*The Player Queen*). The work of J. M. Synge was far more dramatic. His dialect language was superb and *Riders to the Sea* is already a classic. He was more realistic than Yeats and he took a sardonic view of the Irish peasant. For this reason *The Playboy of the Western World* infuriated a Dublin audience, long accustomed to the picturesque and unreal 'stage Irishman.' In recent years realistic has outstripped poetic drama in Ireland. The output in post-war England has been more varied.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE POST-WAR DRAMA IN ENGLAND

It is generally said that the ultimate proof of literary merit is the ability of a work to stand the test of time. Posterity is considered the infallible judge, a kind of sieve separating literary nuggets from mere deposits of verbiage. Actually it must frequently have happened that fine plays, neglected or overlooked at their first appearance, remain in obscurity and never attract the searching scrutiny of posterity at all. With the present huge output of books this is more than ever likely to occur. In any case the optimistic belief in the intelligence of future generations is of no help in assessing post-war drama. We are obliged to rely on the opinions of professional critics or on our own judgment, and no one can be certain how far posterity in its supposedly superior wisdom is likely to endorse the verdicts of to-day. Of one thing, however, we may be sure. Whoever else may be forgotten, Somerset Maugham will be remembered.

He is not only a product of the post-war age. Such farces and light comedies as *Jack Straw*, *Lady Frederick* and *Mrs. Dot* were all written before 1914. Furthermore he had already made a name for himself as a novelist with *Liza of Lambeth*, written while he was still qualifying as a doctor, a profession which he has never actually practised.

He has said that he learned to write by copying passages from Swift and other accomplished stylists and reproducing them from memory. The method certainly proved a success, since he has developed a supple and lucid style as well suited to the writing of stage dialogue as to the short story of which he is an acknowledged master.



Maugham has not altogether abandoned the light comedy of his early days. *Home and Beauty* (1923) is a farce dealing with the return of an officer whose wife, believing him dead, has married his best friend. Each voices the most gentlemanly sentiments and each is firmly determined to hand the matrimonial burden—for the lady is incredibly selfish—to the other. There is a rather more serious idea in *The Unattainable*, in which a lawyer has for long worshipped a woman deserted by an undesirable husband. The death of this reprobate is reported in the papers and the friends of the couple hurry round to congratulate them on at last being able to marry, as they have so frequently longed to do. But now, brought face to face with matrimony, they find the prospect less alluring. Both are middle-aged, both attached to their own home comforts and, for the first time since their association had begun, they quarrel. The situation is saved by a worldly-wise doctor who reports that the husband is alive and the lawyer happily reverts to the rôle of faithful, heart-broken and really contented adorer. In *The Constant Wife* the serious element has increased, but there is still plenty of comedy. The wife, who has really known about it all along, is at length forced by the well-meaning interference of her relations to take notice of her husband's intrigue with a married woman. Her quickness of wit saves him when the husband of his mistress comes perilously close to discovering the truth and he is amazed by her magnanimity. When, however, she announces her own intention of going away for a few weeks with a man who had always been in love with her, he at once assumes an air of outraged dignity. But she goes serenely and he is left eagerly awaiting her return and pondering over the old question of different sets of rules for men and women. It is not a thesis play: it is far too good a comedy for that.

This piece indicates Maugham's ironic and unsentimental outlook. It is to be seen, too, in *The Breadwinner*

a play which delighted the middle-aged members of the audience, heartily sick of being told by the young that they were fossilised and ineffectual. Here a father, who has served in the war and since gone daily to the Stock Exchange, suddenly decides that he has had enough of slaving for a couple of pert children and a frivolous wife. So, refusing the help offered to tide him over financial difficulties, he allows his business to go smash, blandly tells his astonished family that he finds them as devastatingly boring as they have unmistakably found him, and walks out of the house to lead his own life on the small income that remains to him.

This play makes it clear that Maugham's opinion of humanity is low, but his sense of humour generally prevents his work from being grim. Unlike Barrie, he is a pessimist, but he shares with him a dislike of dealing with social problems. Nor has he any message to give, for which reason Tolstoy would have regarded him as a negligible writer. Nevertheless there is plenty of food for thought in such plays as *The Sacred Flame*, in which a mother takes it upon herself to kill her son, who has been crippled in a flying accident, when she sees his young wife falling in love with a man whose physical fitness makes him a more proper mate for her than the husband to whom she is endeavouring to remain faithful.

This is an essentially serious piece and it is in serious comedy that Maugham is at his best. His work has a detached and astringent quality. He regards people as scientific specimens to be examined and classified and, though he is far too capable a dramatist to write exclusively of unattractive beings, he is mainly concerned with the more unusual and less agreeable aspects of human nature.

*Our Betters* shows him in his most caustic mood. It directs a searchlight onto the lives of a group of worthless people who value money and enjoyment above everything else. They are without faith or honour and betray each other in their pursuit of the pleasure which continually

eludes them. It is a bitter picture of a type of person common in most countries, more particularly immediately after the war.

Maugham's finest play is *The Circle*. Here a man who, thirty years before, had sacrificed a brilliant political career to run away with the wife of his friend, returns with his mistress to see her former husband, her son and his young wife. Romantically minded and herself in love with a planter on leave from Malaya, the young wife has been eagerly anticipating the arrival of a pair who have given up everything for love. She finds the man querulous and over-fond of whisky, the woman pathetically anxious to conceal her age. It is a disillusioning experience. Her father-in-law urges his former wife to warn the girl, from her own knowledge, of what life will be if she leaves her husband and goes off with the planter. The elder woman obeys, but it is still apparent to the girl that the other does not really regret what she has done and the play closes with history repeating itself.

It is natural that Maugham should feel bitter about the war. *For Services Rendered* shows the havoc wrought by it in a family. The son of the house is blinded and feels himself a drag on the others. One of his sisters has missed her chance of marriage and, when at length she does fall in love with an ex-naval officer, the latter, who has got into financial difficulties in trying to run a garage, shoots himself to escape arrest. The other members of the family and their friends are bewildered, cynical or stupid and their condition is largely an outcome of the war. There is nothing impossible in the play, though one has a feeling that the tragedies of half a dozen families are here condensed into one. With *Sheppey*, the story of a barber who is regarded as insane when, having won a good sum in a sweepstake, he prepares to put into practice the principles of Christianity by giving the money away, Somerset Maugham announced his intention of writing no more for the stage.

His reasons are interesting. He maintains that the stark, crisp dialogue now demanded limits the playwright's scope and robs the drama of beautiful language. The critics, he says, despise healthy farce and want plays of profound original ideas, which not one writer in a thousand can be expected to produce. Most serious of all, the dramatist is required to sacrifice good situation, the chief source of strength of the playwrights of old, and concentrate only on the study of character which is frequently quite undramatic. That there is something in these objections nobody can deny and the present reaction of certain writers against realism in the theatre is primarily due to the conditions of which Maugham complains.

Maugham's gift of easy dialogue is shared by Frederick Lonsdale, who has apparently deserted the stage for the films. After beginning in rather melodramatic fashion with *The Fake*, Lonsdale turned to the writing of sophisticated comedy in such pieces as *Canaries Sometimes Sing*, *The High Road*, and *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*. All these show considerable wit, the plots are ingeniously handled and the characters make up in brightness and charm what they lack in significance as human beings.

Extreme sophistication also characterises some of the work of Noel Coward, whose rise to popularity has been meteoric. He seemed at first to be no more than an impudent and flippant young man with a taste for epigram, a keen eye for theatrical effect, sometimes of a rather spurious kind, and a contempt for middle-class stolidity, coupled a trifle incongruously with a dislike of empty-headed noodles, gigolos and women who refuse to grow old gracefully. Such were the ingredients of *The Vortex* and, in a more pleasant form, of *The Young Idea*, in which a brother and sister rescue their father from hunting circles and reconcile him with their mother. Even *Hay Fever* is not very different, though it is brilliantly constructed. Noel Coward excels in displaying tempera-

mental artistic folk, to whom he generally opposes respectable citizens of conventional ideas. This is true of *Design for Living* in which two artists, having shared in turn the favours of a lady, combine together when she leaves them and take her away from the humdrum individual she has married. It is amoral and highly entertaining. Moreover Coward contrives to invest these brittle creations of his fancy with reality, at least while they are on the stage. These are not profound plays and we had grown accustomed to labelling him as a deft, but rather trivial playwright, whose vogue would quickly pass, when he surprised everyone by producing a charming, romantic musical play, *Bitter Sweet*, with a frankly sentimental love-story. He followed it with *Cavalcade*, of which patriotism is the dominant note. In both plays the products of jazz civilisation took some shrewd blows, and critics, unable to reconcile sentiment and patriotism with the previous work of Noel Coward, whispered that he was a mere opportunist, who had cleverly provided what was most acceptable to people who had struggled clear of the war and were now encountering the full force of the world-wide financial depression. Any dramatist of a satirical turn of mind is entitled to write with his tongue in his cheek. But Coward is a man, not a monkey whose cheek pouches will hold a dozen nuts and a corresponding cubical content of tongue. No playwright, who has a living to earn, can be blamed for writing a play which is likely to attract rather than repel and Coward doubtless did so. But there is no reason on that account to question his sincerity. And there can be no doubt at all of the depth of feeling behind *Post-Mortem*, a thoughtful and ingenious study of the disillusionment of an officer killed in the war, who returns to see how far the world has profited by the sacrifice of millions of lives. This and two plays of the trenches, *Journey's End* by R. C. Sheriff and *The White Château* by the late Reginald Berkeley, together with *The Likes of 'Er* by Charles

McEvoy, are the most notable 'war' plays produced in this country. Noel Coward is still a youngish man. He has done much already. At the moment of writing it is impossible to prophesy what he is likely to achieve in the future.

The same applies to John Van Druten. He, like Coward, has a fine sense of the theatre, but there is nothing resembling flippancy about him. Love provides the theme of most of his plays, but it is love brought into contact with hostile convention or environment. In *Young Woodley*, the love of a school-boy for the young wife of his housemaster: in *Behold we Live*, the love of a girl, married to a scoundrel, for a barrister whose wife will not divorce him. Sometimes the problems of several people are involved. *After All* shows a brother and sister rebelling against parental control. The daughter goes to live with a married man who shrinks from divorcing his ailing wife. The son marries an actress who makes him profoundly unhappy. In the end, after the parents are dead, the brother and sister find themselves becoming, in their turn, as domesticated as the elders whose attitude towards them they had once found so irksome. *London Wall* has, save in the case of two minor characters, no love story. That is the tragedy, for the central figure of this play, set in a solicitor's office, is a typist of 35 who is steadily losing her grip on the man she hopes to marry. It is a play of poignant emotion, the power of which is heightened by contrast with the dispassionate business background. The work of Van Druten is very similar to that of C. L. Anthony (Dodie Smith), whose *Autumn Crocus*, *Service* and *Call it a Day* were all deservedly successful. The best work of both these playwrights is probably yet to come.

One of the most vital and original modern dramatists is Dr. James Bridie. In *Tobias and the Angel* and *Jonah and the Whale*, while preserving much of the Biblical narrative, he has written plays which are humorous,

dramatic and simple in the manner of the Frenchman Obey's delightful *Noah*. He can strike, too, a grimmer note, as in *The Anatomist*. This play, having as its theme the infamous body-snatching exploits of Burke and Hare, contains a vivid portrait of Dr. Knox, who became the chief figure in the controversy over the procuring of corpses for medical research. By the introduction of a Glasgow family, a member of which becomes engaged to a young doctor studying under Knox, the problem is seen, not as an abstract issue, but as a personal one affecting individuals. Dr. Bridie has experimented with various types of play and always with distinction. His best work, however, is *The Sleeping Clergyman*, an episodic piece, showing how, in the third generation, a doctor's belief in the gifts of a family with a mixed heritage of intellect and dissipation is justified. The play is a brilliant dramatic venture into the realms of the biologist.

Dr. Bridie, like Sir James Barrie, is a Scotsman. Sean O'Casey, like Wilde, Shaw and St. John Ervine, is an Irishman. Ervine after making with *Jane Clegg* and *John Ferguson* serious studies of bourgeois and peasant mentality, has lapsed, highly successfully, into conventional English social comedy (*The First Mrs. Fraser*, *Anthony and Anna*). O'Casey, though in *The Silver Tassie* resorting to expressionistic devices for the better denunciation of war, has remained a realist, or rather a naturalist, who spares his audience nothing in the sharp mingling of bitter comedy with stark tragedy in such pieces as *Junno and the Paycock*, *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*.

These plays deal with the Irish troubles, either during the Easter Rebellion of 1916 or with the disorders immediately before the Establishment of the Irish Free State. It is not a flattering portrait of the Irish that he gives. He shows many of them as drunken, boastful, idle and cowardly and, while there is much that is humorous, there is a sardonic ring in O'Casey's laughter. His work bears

some resemblance in its presentation of slum life to Gorki's *Lower Depths*. But in the Russian's play there is little incident. O'Casey mixes comedy and tragedy in rapid succession. His plays are not neatly constructed. They are rather crude, but they have a terrific, almost primitive dramatic power, which puts to shame the insignificance and essential triviality of popular drawing-room comedy.

The realistic work of O'Casey and others has provided one manifestation of serious drama in the post-war period. Another—and a very important one—has been the biographical or historical play. The vastly increased number of novels in recent years has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in the output of biographies. These books almost resemble novels in that they are easy to read and have no explanatory footnotes or references. Some of them tend to whitewash the villains of the past or decry men long accepted as heroes. But most of them consider their central figures neither as scoundrels nor as demi-gods, but simply as human beings whose birth or career brought them into contact with interesting people and events and whose psychology is worthy of study. Whether André Maurois or Lytton Strachey is primarily responsible for the vogue of this kind of book it is not easy to say, for the former's *Ariel* (or the Life of Shelley) and the latter's *Queen Victoria* both appeared in 1921. At all events dramatists eagerly turned to the biographical play.

Bernard Shaw in his handling of Napoleon and Caesar had already prepared the ground, but he was concerned rather with showing that human idols have feet of clay than with serious dramatic portraiture. John Drinkwater actually anticipated the writers of the new biographies with his historical play *Abraham Lincoln* (1918) followed later by *Mary Stuart*, *Oliver Cromwell* and *Robert E. Lee*. These were episodic pieces not unlike Elizabethan chronicle plays. There is no rhetoric or ornament about



them. The chief characters are important figures, but they have the feelings and speech of ordinary folk. Since then such plays have multiplied, becoming more taut and well-knit. There is little poetry in the language, still less any attempt at period speech. Shaw's *St. Joan* uses the tongue of a north-country English peasant. The hero of Gordon Daviot's *Richard of Bordeaux* is described by one of his disgruntled uncles as a 'pacifist,' a disconcertingly modern word. These plays have made notable figures of the past into people comprehensible to men of the present. Among the best are the Henry VIII piece, *The Rose without a Thorn* by Clifford Bax and the Napoleonic play of R. C. Sheriff and Jeanne de Casilis, *St. Helena*. Prominent among the biographical pieces are *The Barretts of Wimpole St.* by Rudolf Besier and *The Lady with a Lamp* (Florence Nightingale) by Reginald Berkeley. These and others make excellent drama and all, by their very nature, are open to certain criticisms.

It is argued against them that the view they give of notable people is not the correct one, since they are projections of the individual author's idea of the particular historical personage concerned. But this, surely, is no fault for the dramatist's object is not to reproduce history but to produce a good play. Historical accuracy is of secondary importance. Another objection is better founded. This is that the dramatist, looking back to the past, gives to his characters ideas and points of view which they were unlikely to have at the time in which they lived, and this anachronism is more serious than the inaccuracies of costume which Irving deplored in eighteenth-century productions of Shakespeare. But this again, though it may lessen the historical value of a play, need not detract from its merit as a drama. The third objection concerns the language. The Elizabethan spectator was trained to appreciate poetry and to regard verse as the proper medium for dramatic expression. To-day poetry is viewed with distrust. No poet can hope to make a living by writing

poetry and, with very few exceptions, the language of modern historical drama approximates to everyday speech. Realistic plays and a 'natural' style of acting have dealt a severe blow at poetry in the theatre—a severe, but not a mortal blow. Mr. Ashley Dukes, for one, is hopeful that tragedy and poetry may find a place in the theatre alongside comedy and prose. *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Rock* by T. S. Eliot and *The Ascent of F6* by W. H. Auden and C. Isherwood are solid arguments in favour of his view. The poetry is not that of Flecker's *Hassan*, of Maselfield's *A King's Daughter* or of Stephen Phillips' *Herod*. It is a queer mixture of imagery and concrete directness, with the homely, Biblical utterances of the Chorus contrasting oddly with passages of the starkest prose. But it is undeniably poetry.

Historical plays, realistic pieces and poetical drama are, save for certain experimental works or frankly propagandist plays, the outstanding forms of serious post-war drama. In addition there have been innumerable farces, comedies and 'crook' plays intended solely for light entertainment. They serve a useful purpose, but they cannot lay claim to a place in theatrical history, least of all in a book as brief as this, which cannot even find space to mention the work of such accomplished serious playwrights as Lord Dunsany, J. B. Priestley or Mordaunt Shairpe. For all that the farce is not to be despised. It provides entertainment and that is a point that some playwrights and not a few critics are apt to overlook. A play may comment upon life. It may arouse awe, pity, admiration or terror. It can be as intellectual as it likes. But it must in some form or other entertain.

The period since 1890 has been one comparable in theatrical activity and achievement only with that of the Elizabethan era. Despite the competition of the cinema and of the wireless, the theatre, so often in the course of its history described as moribund, shows no sign of expiring. Naturally bad plays outnumber good.

Naturally also, good plays fail while bad ones flourish and there is an undeniable dearth of full-blooded, robust comedy. Still good plays *are* written and some of them succeed. As long as that goes on, the theatre, "so unconscionable a time adying," will continue to exist. Which means, unfortunately, that people like myself will continue to write books about it !

THE END

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